



*the
Golden
Candlestick*

**THE CROSS OF OUR LORD
JESUS CHRIST**

Part 1

T. Austin-Sparks

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by T. Austin-Sparks

This is a transcription of the Easter Conference at Honor Oak, London, during World War II. From the text it is obvious that the listeners were familiar with some of the terms the speaker uses. However, the meaning for us is not always evident. The editors of 'The Golden Candlestick' have chosen not to try to explain what the speaker meant or give background information by means of footnotes. But for some editorial comments please visit thegoldencandlestick.nl

THE CROSS AND THE SINFUL BODY OF THE FLESH

It is in my heart very strongly to come again to a fresh consideration of the meaning of the cross. Let me say at once that, when we speak of the cross, we mean the death, burial, resurrection, ascension and the exaltation of our Lord Jesus, for the ascension and the exaltation are in virtue of the death and the burial and the resurrection. So we must not have in mind just the death and burial when we speak of the cross. The cross is a very comprehensive matter.

Then we must recognize that the cross is the way to everything and the only way to anything now in the will of God. There is no way into any part of all the will of God apart from the cross, but God has comprehended everything for us in that cross. We cannot know anything apart from the cross, and if we cannot know, we cannot have, we certainly cannot attain unto. The very first glimmer of light and understanding of the things of God in a living way requires and demands the cross.

And that, of course, means in the next place, that the cross has to be an experience. It must be experiential, that is, something which we know in ourselves. Presently we shall say much more about that, but let it be understood at once as we seek to look at the, shall I say, elementary, simple truths about the cross, that we are not thinking merely in terms of history, of something which took place at a certain time in the history of this world, an historical thing, but we are thinking of something which is above history, that is greater than time, comprehending all things. It is something spiritual; the cross is pre-eminently a spiritual thing. It is true that it took place on a certain spot at a certain time in the Person of a certain Being, but its meaning, values, implications and intent go back from that time into the past eternity and reach on when time shall be no more. That which is spiritual is timeless and universal and the cross is pre-eminently a spiritual thing, in its deepest and truest meaning in spiritual experience.

Then we must also see that the New Testament in its many parts is a many-sided unfolding and application of the meaning of the cross, and

this in relation to many very practical matters. As you pass from book to book in the New Testament, you find that the cross is coming up again and again, Christ crucified in certain particular and peculiar connections, and when you bunch them all together you find that you have this comprehensive and many-sided application to and interpretation of the cross in relation to all sorts of things. Then the New Testament becomes an all-round unveiling of what the cross means in this and that and another connection, and you have to read your New Testament in the light of Calvary, for that is the meaning of the New Testament. It is a *new* Testament, comprehensively a new covenant. It is the covenant of grace, and it takes its rise from the '*fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel's veins*' (William Cowper, red.), and that is the cross. There are three major matters which cover this whole ground of God's work in the cross. I only mention them for the moment and pass on.

The threefold ground of the activity and application of the cross

1. God's eternal purpose

Firstly, there is God's eternal purpose concerning the creation and the cross goes right to the heart of that. It is only possible for God to realize that great eternal purpose by means of the cross, but, to put that the other way, it is by means of the cross that God secures His eternal purpose, and the cross becomes central and basic to that great purpose of God from eternity.

2. The satanic system

In the next place, there is the entire system of spiritual evil, both as to the nature of evil and evil spiritual workers, intelligences, powers. The cross goes right to the root of that spiritual evil in its nature, essence and personal activity, of that whole kingdom of spiritually evil intelligences. We find here that all the time the cross is being brought home to that realm of spiritual evil in this universe and eventually it is by the cross that that spiritual evil and whole system of spiritual iniquity and spiritual intelligence is rooted out and finally destroyed from God's universe, and that was virtually and potentially and in Christ actually accomplished in the cross.

3. Man as central to God's purpose

Then in the third place there is man, man as central to God's purpose, man as the object of these spiritually evil intelligences, and we find that the cross is all the time being brought home to man in what he is as other than God purposed that he should be, as what he is because of the activity of spiritual

evil and as to what God intends that he shall be in conformity to that purpose of His, and the cross relates to that. So continually we find the cross dealing with us, brought home to us, in this threefold connection, God's purpose centered in man as the centre of God's creation, spiritual iniquity as now having its roots in man, the cross deals with it and man is ultimately glorified, realizing all God's intention and the cross works that out.

So, you see, the cross is a tremendous thing, and if you could just take that threefold ground of the activity and application of the cross and read your New Testament book by book, sometimes almost chapter by chapter you will find that is exactly what the cross is dealing with, exactly what the cross is saying. God had a purpose; the cross is the instrument of realizing it. Man has become the centre of an evil activity; the cross is delivering him from that. Man is intended by God to come to glory, and the cross is realizing that. So the cross is a mighty experience, a spiritual experience.

The cross in Romans

Now we said that these New Testament books, mostly letters, each stand related to some particular, peculiar activity of the cross, and we shall at least venture to begin a survey of that. I say it is a venture, because I am quite sure that we shall not complete it this time, but it does not matter, so long as we see what the Lord wants to say to us now. So we take up the letter to the Romans as the first and see in a very general and broad way the place of the cross in this letter, and we may say that the Roman letter in the main shows the cross as connected with the sinful body of the flesh. I am not going to deal with that phrase very thoroughly or very minutely. It is within the compass of that that we have the message of the cross in this letter.

The cross racial

We might perhaps just make a broad survey of what the letter contains before we come to the particular practical application of the cross here. First of all, we are brought into the presence of the comprehensiveness of the cross. It is shown to us to be firstly racial, that is as connected with, or related to, the whole race. That is the issue of a great survey, the survey of the whole world, the whole creation, with a view to discovering where righteousness is, and the verdict after that survey is that sin is universal. "All have sinned" (Rom. 3:23). "There is none righteous, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10). Therefore the cross is racial; it is not for some, omitting

others. It is not even for the poor, acknowledged sinful heathen, omitting the religious Jew. No, we know how the argument is brought to its finest application and finally not one is found righteous in the sight of God. The cross, therefore, is universal and comprehensive because sin is universal.

The cross legal

Then the cross is legal, because everyone is responsible. Responsibility is brought to the door of everyone, not only the fact of unrighteousness or of sin, but responsibility. In different ways, responsibility is brought home. Where there is much light, there may be much responsibility. Light may lessen, but there is, according to this letter, no place where there is no light at all, even if it only be that dim, flickering, uncertain light of conscience, of a sense of there being something right and something wrong. That is enough for the apostle in his argument, to create responsibility, even if it is only in that very imperfect realm, the creation. There is a sunset, there is a world of nature, and this argues something and that argument creates responsibility. Therefore, if there is responsibility, things become legal at once, that is, we are under condemnation. The law, some sort of law, descends upon us, and the whole universe, and we are condemned as law-breakers. The cross becomes legal inasmuch as Christ crucified stands legally in the place of all who are judged and condemned, and the judgment passes upon one Man for all.

Then we are held responsible before God for the death of the Lord Jesus — the greatest responsibility of all. If faith accepts that death as our death, we are acquitted, says the apostle. If faith does not accept that death as our death, we still lie under judgment.

The cross crucial

But then the third thing about the cross here is that it is crucial, that is, it constitutes a point of crisis. It sets forth a point to which we have to come in one definite act of faith to turn what was true in the case of the Lord Jesus into truth in our own case. That is the argument of Romans 6, as you know. We were buried with Him in baptism. That is the crisis. We take a certain course in a certain form. We came to the crisis of the cross and said His death is my death, His burial is my burial, His resurrection is my resurrection. It is crucial, not something just to be accepted as a doctrine, as a truth. It has to head us up to a position, a clear accounting once and for all.

A threefold transition by the cross

Then the second great part of this letter brings us to a threefold transition.

- 1) Transition from death to life. The cross has a death side and a life side, and by our acceptance of that cross, we are brought over from its death side to its life side.
- 2) Then the second transition is from the flesh to the Spirit (Romans 8). The cross stands right between those two things, and if we have accepted the cross, that is an end of walking after the flesh, minding the things of the flesh. That is the beginning of walking after the Spirit and minding the things of the Spirit. It is a clear-cut transition by the cross, and if we walk after the flesh, being Christians, we are nullifying the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- 3) And then, in the third place, the transition from unprofitableness to profitableness (Romans 12). “Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service” (Rom. 12:1) and so on. On the one side of the cross there is unprofitableness to God, there is nothing because the flesh gains nothing, in the flesh dwells no good thing. On the other side, there is the life of the Spirit, profitableness to God, a fruitful life.

The eternal relationships of the cross

Now, I will not go much further with that general survey. You might note, however, the eternal relationships or significance of the cross, how the cross is related to the whole creation. You know those mighty words in Romans 8:20 about the creation itself being subjected to vanity, not of its own will, but by reason of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption. The cross is related to that subjecting of the whole creation to bondage and vanity, because the creation can never realize its intended end while the curse rests upon it. The cross sees the curse destroyed and eventually the creation delivered from that bondage into the liberty of the children of God, and then there is that other word connecting the cross with the sons of God. That is a great eternal thought — the sons of God — and the cross effects that glorious purpose of God in bringing many sons to glory, to use a phrase from another letter.

God for us

Now, I want to come to the more immediate message of this letter, and I do rejoice greatly because of the comprehensive blessedness that Romans

comes first in all the letters. I trust that you, with me, are every day coming to rejoice in that more — the wonder of God’s government in arranging the order of these letters, altogether out of their chronological order. You may think it is a mere point of technique, but to me it is a point of unspeakable gratitude that God overshadowed the arrangement of the New Testament to secure that the letter to the Romans comes first. Oh, I want you to see the meaning and value of that and really come to rejoice in it because the great thing about this letter is that here we have everything firstly from God’s side. It is not in the first place our reaching out to God, but it is God’s reaching down to us. If it were our reach up to God, well, we should never get there. Until you and I have really got hold of the unspeakable value and significance of this, we do not have the secret of joy or peace or rest. Here the great thing is that God has taken the initiative and before all else has reached down to us. It is not at all what we have done or are doing or can do; it is what God has done. There is that great statement, that little phrase, but mighty statement of truth, so often used as a text for a topical sermon, “If God be for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31, AV). Have you sat down with that?

“If God be for us, who can be against us?” What is the setting of that? It is the whole letter. It is this whole mighty meaning of the cross. The cross of our Lord Jesus Christ says above everything else: God is for us! God is towards us! God has reached down — no, God has come down, and He has come down because He is concerned, He is interested, He is interested unto death for us. That is the extent of God being for us, up to the point of giving Himself and all that He possessed on our behalf, and what a mighty ‘all’ that is, and if you want that strengthened at all, then interpret that little fragment by what follows immediately.

“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not also with him freely give us all things?” (Rom. 8:31,32).

Now then, is that to be strengthened? Yes, here it is.

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” (Rom. 8:35) — the love of Christ for us displayed, demonstrated, in the giving of Himself in His cross — “... shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:35-38).

And let us at once say that is not my love for God, but His love for me. If God is for us to that extent, then I say again, I thank God that the letter to the Romans comes first. This is the immovable foundation, that the cross of

our Lord Jesus Christ shows that God is for us and how much God is for us and what He has done for us. Oh, that we had such immovable faith in that as the foundation itself is immovable!

The objective and subjective work of the cross

Now, here is where I want to do some underlining, some italicizing and some emphasizing, using all the words that I can employ for this purpose. It is in connection with preserving the balance between the objective and the subjective work of the cross. I know that the letter to the Romans deals with the subjective, brings it into view, shows how necessary it is, but God forbid that any one of us should dabble with the subjective work of the cross until this foundation is settled and our faith therein is settled. You see, what we call the experimental side of the cross can hide the very power of the divine side, if you are not careful. The experimental can hide the power of the divine side. It can prevent the Holy Spirit from showing us the work of Christ alone as the basis of faith. The basis of faith is not our experience, it is what Christ has done, what God has done. The Holy Spirit is primarily concerned with presenting to us Christ and His work for us. The Holy Spirit preaches a living Christ. The Holy Spirit does not preach an experience. There is much confusion and despair in the lives of many Christians because there has been failure at this very point. You know quite well that we are not weak on the subjective side of the cross, but I would far sooner let that go than the other, if there has got to be the choice. But it is not God's thought that either should go, but do remember that there can even be disasters and despair as the result of preaching an *experience* instead of preaching the work of Christ. Let us lift up a living Christ and not our dead selves. That is what a lot of people are doing — lifting up their dead selves all the time. It is not the living Christ always in their view.

You see, the subjective side of the cross is only a matter of the Holy Spirit Himself taking the death of Christ and working it out. What we need is to see the meaning of Christ's death, accept it by faith, trust the Holy Spirit to work it out and cling tenaciously to our acceptance before ever the experience started. So many get hold of this subjective side of the cross, the experience, because the Holy Spirit is doing things, and they allow the very work of the Holy Spirit in making the cross effectual in them to rob them of their assurance. So Satan takes hold of the most blessed and precious thing and turns it against the Lord and against His own people, and you must remember that that is always Satan's object. If you become possessed of any precious truth or any precious part of the whole truth, no matter what it is, so that that precious

thing of revelation comes to mean something to you, what is Satan's instant and continuous strategy? — to turn that thing to your undoing, not only to cast a shadow over that thing, but to use it. You must remember God's strategy is exactly the same. Satan will do something and God takes hold of it to use it for another purpose to His own glory, but Satan takes hold of the things of God to use them for his glory. In this matter of the cross as wrought by the Holy Spirit in us, Satan is always present to get hold of this precious thing and turn it round against the Lord and against the child of God.

Now, if you will watch closely, you will see running through the New Testament, through these letters, this very thing, how the cross is there to destroy the works of the devil. All the way along in the experience of the people of God, right through to the book of Revelation, it is there for that purpose. But when you come to see how it is destroying the works of the devil or how it there applies to the works of the devil from place to place, you will find that it is always dealing with some wile of Satan which is intended to nullify the cross itself. I cannot follow through the letters to show that now, but you think about that. You find it in Romans — therefore the need of assurance as to your foundation, your basis is your justification by faith in what God has done in Jesus Christ before ever the work was commenced in you.

So you pass from letter to letter, and you find this thing coming up again and again in different forms. For example, you get to Ephesians and here you reach the heavenlies. But the heavenlies is not too exalted a place for Satan to still carry on his work, and there you find the wiles of the devil. They are not mentioned specifically, but are implied quite definitely. "Take the helmet of salvation". What is that? The letter to the Romans. "The breastplate of righteousness". What is that? The letter to the Romans. "The shield of faith". This is the letter to the Romans, but it is brought up into the heavenlies. The breastplate of righteousness — quench the fiery darts that they shall break themselves on what? The breastplate of righteousness, which is by faith in Jesus Christ. How shall I put a front to the wiles of the devil? Let me know first of all what are those wiles. He is trying to strike to my heart as to my acceptance. How shall I face them? With a breastplate. What is that? That my acceptance is not upon the ground of what I am, but what Christ has done. This is the simple gospel, elementary truth, but saints are up against this battle to the last breath. You see the wiles of the devil to undercut the foundation of Romans in another realm, in another connection. I say again, I thank God for the blessedness that Romans comes first, because it does not have to do with how far I have attained, what stage I have reached of spiritual perfection, but it sets everything for me in the first place in what God has done, and when that is settled in me, in my heart, then all the rest is settled. Potentially, the battle

is over. I mean that, if we can hold that ground, stand, withstand, and having done all stand on that ground, we may feel the force of the satanic waves breaking on us, they may come with fury against us, but the rock holds. Stand!

Well then, here we need to see that the death of Christ applied by the Holy Spirit is the death of Christ and not my experience of death. You see, somehow or other, people get so mixed up over this matter. They are all the time trying to apply their death to themselves, that is, to make themselves dead. Oh no, it is purely the work of the Holy Spirit to apply the death of Christ, not to apply our death, but to apply His death, for in that death there is a mighty power. There is no power or virtue in our death as such, but there is mighty virtue in the death of the Lord Jesus. The Holy Spirit is taking that mighty power of His death and of His resurrection and applying it to us. There is a very real sense in which the subjective experience of the cross is still objective. It is not us; it is Christ. It is not our death that is of value; it is Christ's. That is the work of the Holy Spirit making good the death of Christ and not our trying to bring ourselves to death, to die, to come to an end. The Holy Spirit can deal with all that and He will deal with it very effectively, but it is only safe for the Holy Spirit to do that when we have got the ground of Romans thoroughly settled.

Well, I am going to stop there. We have to see what Christ's death meant, then to accept it by faith, trust the Holy Spirit to apply it and hold on in faith to our basic acceptance even before the experience of His death has begun to be applied — our acceptance through faith, and how much more there is! But go away rejoicing that Romans is at the beginning. Ask the Lord to show you the glorious meaning of that, then it will be safe if He should lead us on to other things. It will be safe to touch Corinthians, it will be profitable to touch Galatians then, we will get on in Ephesians then, but all the rest will only bring us to confusion and despair until we have settled Romans — God for us!

THE CROSS AND THE NATURAL MAN

In our previous meditation, we were led to return to the message of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we were mainly taken up with the many-sided revelation and application of the meaning of the cross as given to us in the various letters and books of the New Testament. We were seeing that each of these books brings some aspect or meaning of the cross into view in relation to some particular matter, and we were rejoicing in the blessedness that Romans comes first in the present arrangement.

All things in Christ

Now, we did not even finish what we wanted to say in that connection, so I just want to add one thing which, to my mind, is the thing about it all before passing on to the next phase in the first letter to the Corinthians. The thing to be added to what we have said, and really which covers all that we have said as to the cross in Romans is this. The cross is intended by God to gather up everything into His Son and to make His Son the centre and focal point of everything of God, so that the apostle, right at the opening of the letter to the Romans, uses that phrase — “the gospel of God ... concerning his Son” (Rom. 1:1,3), and the Roman letter, in its particular message gathered into that phrase, means that, in the matter of salvation in all its aspects, justification by faith, righteousness through faith, sanctification through faith, and everything else in our salvation is centered, seated and fixed in the Lord Jesus Christ. What the Lord seeks to bring home to us by the Holy Spirit is this, that we are not going to have it in ourselves, and brings us back to the point from which we started and really in the end registers no progress at all. That is that the pursuit of something in ourselves, to find righteousness, goodness in ourselves, that which is well-pleasing to God in ourselves, holiness, sanctification in ourselves as ourselves, or any other thing that really relates to God, satisfies God. Until we have stopped seeking to find this in ourselves and have recognized and accepted once and for all that it is in Jesus Christ, God’s Son,

and in Him alone, we have not got even the clue to peace, rest, satisfaction, deliverance or any other benefit that God holds for us. You see it is the great pass over through the cross from one race to one new Man, Christ Jesus.

The whole race in Adam, says this letter to the Romans, is put out by the cross. We are in that, and, by the resurrection there is, not a race brought in at once, but a Man, a racial Man. Later on there will be a race who have taken their nature from that racial Man, but not one of us has yet reached the point where we have attained unto the fulness of Christ and can therefore stand up as a perfect specimen of the new race. Is there anyone ready to stand up and say, Here is a perfect specimen of the new race in Jesus Christ, in myself I am that! You know you will not. We shall one day be like Him when we are fully conformed to the image of God's Son. We shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is and we shall be satisfied when we awake in His likeness. At present conformity goes on, but are we to wait for our rest, our peace, our joy, our settled assurance until we are perfect? No. We have our peace, our rest, our assurance, our everything now in Christ, but it is there for us by faith as complete and as perfect as ever it will be when we are perfected. You see, we are not adding something to Christ by growing in grace. We are not making Christ more perfect by becoming more perfect ourselves. We have finality already in Christ by faith, and that faith is the ground upon which God can get on with His work in us, but He can never get on with His work in us until we are settled in this faith, that Christ is already our perfection. So it is in the matter of justification, sanctification and righteousness, not now what we are or what there is in us, but it is Christ. That is the whole point of Romans. It is Christ, and our answer to the Accuser, the answer to our own consciences, is simply Jesus Christ. *'I have no other argument, I need no other plea; it is enough that Jesus died, and Jesus died for me'* (the chorus of the song, 'My Faith has Found a Resting Place', Eliza Edmunds Hewitt, red.).

That, so far as standing, acceptance and peace of heart are concerned, is enough. It is Christ.

Deliverance from the natural man by the cross

Now with that, we can pass on to the letter to the Corinthians. I think as we begin to look at the subjective operation of the cross in the hands of the Holy Spirit, taking it that we have settled our foundation in the objective, there are two fragments that will give us the key to this first letter to the Corinthians. "I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). "One saith, I ...; and another, I ... are ye not men?" (1 Cor. 3:4).

Well, here quite clearly the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ is related to the natural man, and in this letter we have to see what the cross has to say and do with the natural man, and we are not speaking about the unsaved, the unregenerate. We are talking about Christians. This term, 'natural man', is a very broad term. If we knew the truth behind this letter as to the people concerned, we should find that that term 'natural man' on the one hand rose to considerable heights of beauty, of excellence, of idealism, and, on the other hand, went down to considerable depths of shame, for so the letter makes it clear. The natural man was having a great place in the lives of those Corinthian believers, and here it is not the cross in order to bring them to Christ in that sense of acceptance, standing, justification, but the cross to deliver them from the natural man.

Again it is the same purpose of the cross, as we have just seen in the letter to the Romans, to change the centre from the 'I' to which we have referred in that verse, the self, from that to Christ, and the cross is to do that, and it is here shown that it needs to be done in their case and in every case where the same things obtain in various and numerous connections.

Natural judgment

First of all, the apostle here draws our attention to the way in which the natural man governs in the matter of appraisals of men. "One saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not men?" (1 Cor. 3:4). The apostle charges such with being men. That is all. In other words, that is exactly how men go on; men are governed by that kind of estimate, appraisal, judgment. I like or prefer and choose this! Or, I like and prefer the other! We choose according to our sympathies or antipathies, our affinities or our temperaments. The apostle says, This is the cause of divisions, and it becomes perfectly clear that it is quite impossible to have any real expression of Christ corporate, the Body of Christ, while these natural things govern. "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you?" (1 Cor. 1:13). While this goes on, you are simply setting aside Christ crucified, for Christ crucified means that this natural-mindedness in standards, judgments, estimates, appraisals, has gone. That belongs to man, that is the realm of nature. The cross was intended to mean that only Christ obtains. Here is Paul, yes, and here is Apollos and here is Peter. What are they? Now, there are two ways in which you can look at these men. You can say, 'Well, Paul, he is so and so, and Apollos is so and so, and Peter is so and so, and, being what they are, I take my choice because I prefer this one or that one or the other!' That is one way of looking at it. Or you can take another attitude, another line. Paul says that they are ministers

of *Christ*. Then all that concerns me is what they have to minister of Christ, and if everybody would take that attitude, that position, there would be a perfect expression, because it would be all Christ. There would be perfect oneness and unity; there would be a corporate Christ in expression because it is all Christ.

And you can see in this way how true it is that the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, Christ crucified, is intended to carry us over from this kind of natural appraisal, judgment, standard, to where it is only Christ, all Christ, and there God gets His satisfaction, when we are focussed upon Christ. It is nature's mind about channels, instruments, vessels, and what it amounts to is this, when that attitude is taken and that position is occupied, well, I am more concerned with what I drink out of than with what I drink. When it is brought like that it rather startles us. It ought to shake us into a recognition of what a false position that is. Of course, if you have no concern at all about the drink, if you are not at all thirsty, if you are far from dying for something to drink, then you can afford to talk about what you are drinking out of and to reject the draught because the vessel is not just what you like. That is the test. We do not like this one and that one and will not hear this one and that one because we are not conscious that we are desperately in need — in need of the Lord. So the apostle brings this point — Ye are babes and that is how children carry on! — 'I do not like that mug, I do not like this thing that I have to eat or drink out of!' Children are like that, and they push it aside, but if you have seen a really thirsty child, scant thoughts go to the vessel, it is what is inside that matters. Well now, are we spoil children? The point is to be fixed upon Christ, but that requires a work of the cross to smite all this natural standard of values and to bring us to the place where it is Christ, it must be Christ. Unless it is Christ, then we have no alternatives. And do you know that that is one of the works of the Holy Spirit, to get us past that place where we can be foolish and childish about these things, and where it becomes a matter of life or death, and it is not a matter of who brings Christ, how Christ comes, by what means, by what instrumentality, so long as it is *Christ*. You may take it that, when you get there, something of the cross has been wrought. The Lord is bent upon that. Oh, that we might see this. What the Lord is trying to do by His Spirit is to get us to the place where it is Christ, only Christ, and nothing else matters. But He has to bring us there in desperation because of this natural life which is always circling round, ready to give its judgments and its verdicts. What do you know about this? It is a tremendous thing that the Holy Spirit does in this connection. He works and breaks down and gets rid of all our childish nonsense until we say, 'Well now, by any means, no matter what the instrumentality, as long as I know the Lord in a deeper

way, in a fuller way, in a new way.’ That is what He is doing; that is what He will do.

Natural wisdom

We pass to this other thing, this next thing — the natural mind in relation to divine revelation. You notice how much the apostle says here about the wisdom of this world, the wisdom of men. Corinth was a centre, a seat of philosophical learning. The big questions were the questions of man’s nature, origin, life or purpose in being and man’s destiny, all the great points of speculative philosophy that was widespread in Corinth. Some of these Corinthians, some of them at least, had been very much mixed up with that and now they had brought it over into their Christianity and were seeking to explain man, man’s being, man’s nature, man’s life and man’s destiny according to the wisdom of this world. The natural mind was brought over to deal with these great things of God’s intention in man, the ultimate things. Well, that may not interest you very much. It may sound academic, but there are very practical points here for us all, for it amounts to this, what was true for the Corinthians or in the case of the Corinthians, is true in the case of every one of us in some respect. It means this, the problems of life and especially the problems of our own lives. There are problems, the academic problems of even our Christianity. Do you have problems? Well, you have not started to live if you have no problems. You are not awake yet if you have no problems. Don’t let anyone find any comfort from what I am saying. There are some people who cannot be happy unless they are miserable about their problems! Problems very often arise from our temperaments. It would be very interesting if we could know how many of the false doctrines and interpretations of Scripture have arisen from peoples’ temperaments. You see, you may have a very large generous nature, so large that it is bigger than God, and you could never think that any creature that God ever made could be thrown into hell, could be judged and lost for eternity. You are so magnanimous that you feel that is unthinkable, and therefore you will, out of the Scriptures, produce a doctrine of universalism. On the other hand, you may be something at the other extreme temperamentally. You may be mean, small, you may be warped, and then you will get a very small idea of God and your spiritual philosophy will be a very narrow cramped thing and you will not see any room in the kingdom of God for anybody but a certain little private company who hold certain doctrines. That is your temperament, and you have made your doctrine according to your temperament, and that is what is going on all the time in different ways.

That is nature, and that is what was happening at Corinth. They were bringing over their natural mind to Christianity and trying to expound great divine things according to natural wisdom, the wisdom of this world, and the apostle comes right down on that with this: the natural mind, “the natural man, receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God ... neither can he know them” (1 Cor. 2:14, AV). The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. That great, wonderful, boasted, vaunted wisdom of this world in its princes did the most utterly wicked and foolish thing that has ever been done in God’s universe; it put to death God’s Son. The world, by its wisdom, knew not God. You can bring it in many ways, and the apostle argues thus — it is this wisdom of men that makes nil the cross of Christ. The cross has got to be applied to the natural mind, otherwise we will get into trouble, delusion, deception, in a false position, and we shall do violence to the most holy things. The world did violence to God’s Son in murdering Him, and thought they were acting according to the highest wisdom. This natural mind of ours can go to all lengths in doing the most irreparable harm to the holy things of God. We reason, argue, think, interpret, and the fact of the matter is that this natural mind of ours has never been broken and it is projecting itself.

There may be a word of God clear and plain before us, and we may be violating it and still not seeing that we are doing it. The cross has not split up that natural mind and the Spirit of God has not come right through and shined right down deep into our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. For the knowledge of God is in the face of Jesus Christ, not in any human wisdom. Our temperament has got to go by the cross in this matter. Our own way of judging, thinking, reasoning, has got to go. It may be hard to bear and hard to accept, nevertheless it is true, that if the Holy Spirit really gets hold of you and me and does His deep work with the cross of Jesus Christ as His instrument, He will bring us to the place where we do not know anything, where we cannot explain anything. He will rob us in the realm of the things of God and God’s ways, workings and dealings with us, of any explanation that can arise from ourselves and put us into a place of advantage, and that is what we want all the time. We want to be authorities, specialists, experts, counsellors, people to whom others can come and be sure that we have got the clue to their problem, and so Satan would make us centres of wisdom, and that is a violation of the Spirit of God and of the cross of Christ. Let it be known that in the things of God, the Spirit of God will bring us to foolishness. Then we shall only know and be able to speak, to counsel, to advise, as it is given to us by the Holy Spirit. We shall have to wait on God in an instant and say, ‘Lord, I cannot help this person: show me, give me the clue,’ living perhaps from hand to mouth in order

to help others. All the time we know better than anyone that it was not our wisdom, our understanding, but in that self-same hour God gave us wisdom and we are kept very humble, broken and dependent. Beware of that satanic way to make you the possessor of knowledge, and always remember that Christ only is wisdom from God unto us. Christ only is our wisdom, and the cross brings that.

Now, this must affect us in the way in which it is necessary. It may be necessary for it to affect us in a smiting way, a humbling way, or it may be that it comforts some of us for we have been there, we are there, we do not know, that is all. We cannot explain, we are walking in darkness and have no light in many things, and we are having to stay upon God to get every fragment of light for the way from Him. All right, that light is eternal light; that is the light of God. That light is going to bring others into glory and it is going to be something of no earthly order. It is going to mean something very much for the Lord, but it is costly. Every bit of true light and understanding is at the cost of our union with Christ in His death, an emptying of wisdom, knowledge, understanding, that Christ may be our light.

Natural strength

And what is true in that connection is true in the next — the natural mind and the idea of power. The apostle brings these two things together. Wisdom, power, strength, might. Oh, the natural man is very much occupied with one or another of the many forms of love for power. That is, to be. Who does not like to be? Or who likes not to be. No natural person likes not to be. You may be a very meek, retiring, humble, reserved person. You may not be able to say the proverbial ‘Boo!’ to a goose. But there is something in everyone which hates the inferior complex, which revolts against being thought of as nothing. And from that low depth right up in ever higher levels, there is this desire to be and the desire to do. Who does not like being able to do? No person who really is alive and awake is like that. It is natural to want to be and to want to do and to want to have. Even the love of knowledge is the craving for influence, power and position — natural ideas of power, to be. The apostle says that God has chosen the weak, the foolish, the things which are not. This is a new idea of power. What the Holy Spirit will do with us in the matter of wisdom, He will do with us in the matter of strength. He will apply the death of the Lord Jesus to natural strength and bring us to the place where we cannot of ourselves, we have no strength of ourselves: we cannot do, we cannot be, we cannot have. Oh, it is a terrible experience for the natural man, and those of us who know it already are crying out. We know it is right, we know the

doctrine, this truth as to the work of the cross, yet in our hearts so often we cry out against the weakness, the inability that goes with it. The natural man cries, yes, even revolts at times. The apostle said it was true in his own case, that that was God's way of making a path for the power of Christ to encamp upon him, for Christ to be strength and his strength, that it should all be Christ, that this was God's way of working out Christ in all, making Christ everything, giving a way for His Son, that it should not be in us. Oh, we do want it in us, that is the trouble. We want it in us; we want to feel strong and able. We want — and the cross is saying 'No!' to that natural life all the time because that strength in the hands of man has done all the mischief in God's universe. He has taken it into his hands and brought about what we see in the world today. Do you not see the argument before your eyes today? Look at what is happening. Man has taken possession of strength to be, to do, to have. The world is groaning in agony as a result. If we bring in the Lord Jesus, the strength of His nature, sympathy, compassion, the strength of His patience and self-sacrifice, the natural man despises that for that is weakness! Oh, but what a different world it would be if everybody was like that. You and I are called to be expressions of Christ, and the chief enemy is ourselves, the natural man. The cross has got to put him out.

The natural mind in relation to spirituality

One more word as to this letter. It is the natural mind in relation to spirituality. That is found here at Corinth. Yes, this natural mind is no respecter of places or realms or spheres or anything. It gets in anywhere, to the most spiritual, the most sacred, and what we find here through the natural mind working in some at least of these believers at Corinth is the terrible mistake of thinking that spiritual gifts betoken or imply spiritual maturity. We are surprised, perhaps a little shocked or startled to discover that it is made perfectly clear here that that is not so, that spiritual gifts do not betoken spiritual maturity. This church was blessed more than any other church with spiritual gifts. It came behind in no spiritual gift, and the spiritual gifts are mentioned here as in no other place, set out in catalogue. And, running alongside of them, the most immature Christians or the marks of most limited spiritual maturity. Surely a person who is so baptized with the Holy Spirit as to speak in tongues must be a very mature spiritual person. Surely if one is gifted by the Holy Spirit with a gift of wisdom or discernment, they must be spiritually mature. Surely if they have the gift of healing, that must mean real advance in the spiritual life, and this letter says, "No, no, no!" emphatically, no! And the tragedy is that these who had the gifts were using those gifts to

bring themselves into prominence for display purposes. Self was coming up through the gift, and that is contradiction and that means the cross has not done its work and therefore a contrast is made in their case, and it is the contrast between gifts and love. It ought not to be. The gifts were all right in themselves, it is good to have the gifts, but, “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1, AV). Though I have all wisdom, all the gifts, and have not love, I am nothing. You do not get very far when you are nothing. That is not spiritual maturity.

Now, I am not setting these two things over against one another and saying, Do not bother about gifts, go for love! The apostle rebukes you there — “Covet earnestly the best gifts” (1 Cor. 12:31, AV). Do not despise the gifts, but remember the thing which matters is building up. If the gifts do not build up, then they are valueless. Love always builds up. It is better to have love and no gifts than to have gifts and no love. Better still to have gifts and love. The challenge to the gifts and the gifted is — are they edifying? That is the word, but in the original it is, Are they building up? If they are not building up, they have missed their purpose. The thing that matters is building up, and what is building up? Well, love builds up. That is Christ. Gifts may bring me into prominence. I may use the gifts for my natural ends of glory and influence and display, but love will never do that; love will never bring me into prominence. “Love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly” (1 Cor. 13:4). Some of the most unseemly things have taken place in the realm of displayed gifts. Oh, love builds up.

Then what is the meaning? It is not that the cross should cut away the gifts, but the cross should cut away me, and leave the gifts to do their building up work and crown all with love. So, when you reach the end of 1 Corinthians, the issue is just this.

How much of Christ, because of how much of the cross, and the measure of Christ is determined by the measure in which the cross has put the natural man out. Shall we not be satisfied — Lord, give us grace to be satisfied if the taking away of our strength, wisdom, position, reputation, recognition, our everything, just results in that it is Christ. I am satisfied, I consent, I say, ‘Go on with the work, Lord.’ Oh, for grace, grace for that. They are words, but God knows it is not easy on the self-life, this emptying, undoing, bringing down all to make room for Christ. Well, while it is going on, hold on to Romans. Emptied, you do not know, you cannot explain; weak, you cannot do, you cannot be — altogether other than you want. Hold on to Romans, and your light shall shine, shall arise out of obscurity, and Christ will be infinitely more.

To be continued.