



Why the Cross Matters

We need to read the Old Testament through the eyes of Jesus in order to properly understand it the way the New Testament does. In fact, we need to take all of what we read and bring it to the cross in order to understand it correctly.

This can be clearly seen in how the cross shapes our understanding of who God's true Messiah is. Peter, along with the majority of his fellow Jews at the time, had expected the Messiah to be a warrior king who would lead Israel to conquer the gentiles by the sword, just as Joshua had done for Israel when it entered the promised land. Their hopes of having a just world free from oppression were tied up in this being brought about through violence and bloodshed in the name of God, freedom, and justice.

It is an ethos that is alive and well today as well, but it was decidedly not the way of Jesus. Jesus did not come to kill the gentiles and sinners, he came to reconcile and save them, and he did not plan on bringing about this "deliverance" by military conquest, but by giving his life on a cross.

This was an idea that was so completely foreign to Peter that when he heard it, he exclaimed to Jesus "never Lord!" Peter says this immediately after he has declared that Jesus is the Messiah. But the two go hand in hand. Peter's idea of the Messiah, based on what he saw in the OT was one of a war lord who redeems through violent force. But Jesus says to him "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Matthew 16:23). I'm sure you've heard many sermons on the first part of that sentence, but I want to highlight the last part: *you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men*. Jesus thinks that Peter's understanding of the Messiah (an understanding that the majority of biblical scholars would agree is solidly founded on the Old Testament texts) does not represent God's way but man's. Along with Peter **we need to**

completely redefine everything the OT says about the Messiah in the light of the cross.

We need to take the Old Testament texts to the cross and see how they are transformed by it. Take for example the story of David and Goliath. There we have the tale of how the little guy overcomes the giant. But notice that the little guy still overcomes that giant by killing him.

What we need to ask is how this story is like the cross, and how it is not. What in this story points us to the cross, and what in this story needs to die. In Jesus we have the story as well of the little "mustard seed" of the kingdom accomplishing big things, and we have the picture of Jesus overcoming and fighting evil, but the enemy is not other people, it is evil and death itself.

It is crucial that we apply the cross to all of what we read in the Bible. This will often necessarily mean deliberately subverting the intended meaning of a passage in the Old Testament—reading it in a way that may appear to be, as Paul says, "a stumbling block" and "foolishness" to some. The theology of the cross carries with it exactly such radical consequences. It means not only our dying, but also the crucifixion of destructive religion itself. This is precisely why the religious leaders of his time wanted Jesus killed.

If we do not learn how to bring the cross into our exegesis and let it shape how we interpret Scripture, we will likely end up like Peter misreading the Bible and promoting "the way of man not God." This is exactly what Paul did before he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. He had read Scripture and saw that the way to defend God was through violent zeal, and he exercised that zeal, that violence in the name of God, in persecuting the church. But after he met the crucified Lord, he read those same Scriptures and saw a completely different narrative. So he proclaims boldly "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). □

—Derek Flood