

The Cross is God's Christmas Tree

by Dr. J. Vernon McGee

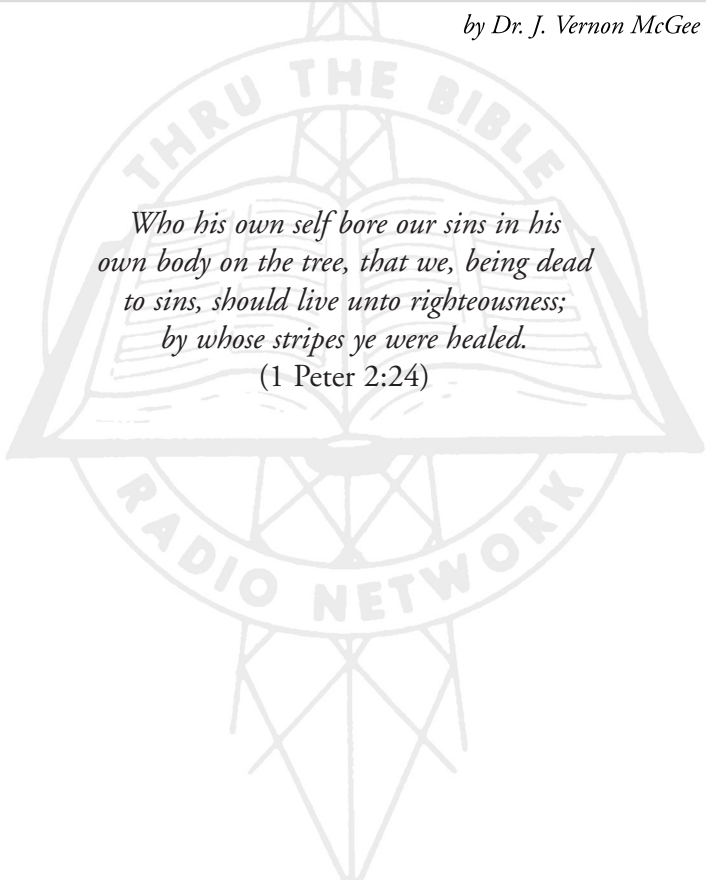


Thru the Bible
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The Cross is God's Christmas Tree

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*Who his own self bore our sins in his
own body on the tree, that we, being dead
to sins, should live unto righteousness;
by whose stripes ye were healed.*

(1 Peter 2:24)

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The Cross is God's Christmas Tree

What is the origin of the modern Christmas tree? This question arises regularly with each return of the holiday season and just as regularly disappears into the silence of uncertainty at the close of the Christmas festivities. While there is no answer of a definite nature, one thing is sure: It has no biblical basis. How the decorated tree found its way into the Christmas celebration is a question which has no categorical conclusion whatsoever.

There are those who connect it with the Saturnalia of the ancient Romans and their use of evergreens over the door during the days of that pagan festival, a festival bitterly denounced by the early church. Tertullian wrote extensively against it.

Some find the origin of the Christmas tree among the Druids who were tree worshipers. And, if your ancestors came from northern Europe, as did mine, I suppose there were Druids among them. Still others find the origin of this custom in the superstition of a corrupt church, but the facts available do not seem to warrant such a conclusion. There is no scriptural basis, and thus far there seems to be no historical basis upon which the use of this merriest of Christmas ornaments rests.

William Muir Auld refers to the fact that Virgil casually alluded to a Roman custom of placing images on evergreens at certain times of the year. George Jacob, an Arabian geographer of the tenth century, related a legend about the night Christ was born in which the forest, despite ice and snow, burst into bloom. However, the first mention of the Christmas tree was made by an unknown citizen in Strassburg in 1604: "At Christmas they set up fir trees in the parlours in Strassburg and hang thereon roses cut out of many-colored paper, etc." (A. Tille, *Yule and Christmas*). The whole idea is doubtless of German origin and probably began in Protestantism.

Some attribute its birth to Martin Luther, but in no way can this be substantiated. Dr. Johann Dannhauer of Germany made this interesting observation many years ago: “Whence comes the custom I know not. It is child’s play. Far better were it to point the children to the spiritual cedar tree, Jesus Christ.”

Actually the important consideration for us is not the origin of the Christmas tree but the present paganism which attends its use and the crass materialism which has been brought to surround it even in Christian homes and celebrations.

In spite of all this, *God has His Christmas tree*. It is not as pretty as the department store tree, I grant you. It is not filled with baubles of color and tinsel, nor is it bright with trinkets and lights. But God does have a Christmas tree – it is the cross of Christ! In fact, the proper name for the cross is tree. You will remember that the early church spoke of it this way. In one of the first great sermons ever given in the church we find, “The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree” (Acts 5:30). And Peter in his first epistle writes:

Who his own self bore our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness; by whose stripes ye were healed. (1 Peter 2:24)

The Gifts Under God’s Christmas Tree

Let us look underneath God’s Christmas tree and discover some of the many gifts of His grace that are there for you today. You may not recognize these gifts at first because they are of a spiritual nature, and you are used to those things which come gift wrapped. Yet they are of infinite beauty, for they come out of the heavenlies. They have not been bought at an expansion sale or a pre-Christmas sale; they have been purchased with the precious blood of Christ.

Because they are spiritual, some may think that they are not practical for today. But, my friend, they are practical and relevant. In each there is something for you at this present hour.

We so often think of salvation as being something that is yet future, that it is a package labeled “Do not open until eternity.” We think of salvation in terms of golden streets, crowns, white robes, and harps in our hands. But, my friend, the salvation that God gives is a salvation for right now, and it brings gifts to you. They are underneath God’s Christmas tree, they have your name on them, and you can receive them now. You will not have to wait till Christmas.

These gifts come to us by faith. And that is the only way in the world in which you will receive any gift at this season of the year. When a package comes through the mail or someone brings a gift to you, it is by faith that your hand accepts the gift. You have confidence in the giver, and because you believe he wants you to have it, by faith you stretch forth your hand and accept it.

We are justified by *faith*. In fact, that is the only way in which God justifies anyone today. When He justifies, He is doing more than forgiving us.

Recently I acted in the capacity of a mediator between two men who had not been getting along too well. In my discussion with one of them about the matter, he said, “Yes, I will forgive him but I can never again have confidence in him.” That was interesting – he had forgiven him but he would not justify him.

There was a famous case in Alabama, years ago, in which a boy was brought before the judge who was his father. It is always the custom that when a judge has a relative come before him, he asks someone else to take the bench, but this judge did not. And when his son, obviously guilty, was brought before him, the boy cried

out, “Can’t you forgive me?” The judge said, “Yes, I can and do forgive you, but I cannot justify you. I cannot justify you before the law. I cannot even justify you before God. You will have to pay the penalty.”

My friend, God *justifies* sinners; He takes those who are guilty and justifies them – without a cause. This means that there is no cause in us whatsoever, but the explanation lies in God. And when God justifies, it is perfect and complete. We are justified from all things. It is not great faith that is so important, but the fact that God justifies; a little faith will save because God justifies in a perfect way. It is not only a perfect but a permanent justification; it is perpetuity – from now on into eternity. God justifies sinners who do nothing more or less than simply trust in Jesus Christ, who come to His Christmas tree, the cross of Christ.

Let me repeat: God has placed at the foot of the cross many gifts for you, and I want to identify some of them here. You may have opened the packages already, and it is wonderful if you have. If you have not, may I urge you not to wait any longer to accept the gifts upon which He has put your name. Make them yours today. I find many gifts here for you and shall enumerate eight of them.

Peace

Underneath His Christmas tree, the first gift I see is *peace*.

Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:1)

In fact, that is the Christmas message – “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Luke 2:14). But this thing of peace is an elusive and ethereal thing that seems impossible in this world in which we live. However, this is not really the Christmas message because a more accurate translation is “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of

good will.” The peace is to a certain class of people, peace with God for those who want that peace.

Today, the root of the trouble in this world is not racial, economic, political, or whatever the media is blaming currently. The root of the trouble is that the human family is at enmity with God. That is, they are God’s enemy. “...There is none that seeketh after God....And the way of peace have they not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Romans 3:11, 17, 18).

There is a remarkable verse in Colossians that has taken on new meaning for me:

And you, that were once alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled.

(Colossians 1:21)

It is easy for us to relate this to the drunkard on skid row, but there is another enemy, and that enemy is found in the godless ideologies of our universities. Man at heart is an enemy of God. But God is not an enemy of man – He is an enemy of sin. Notice that peace comes through Jesus Christ. By His death on the cross He made peace between a holy God and a lost sinner. Peace comes from the knowledge that sins have been forgiven.

There is the gift of peace for any sinner who will receive it, because underneath His Christmas tree lays the gift of eternal life which is in Christ Jesus.

In a bookstore recently I was almost startled to see an entire section given over to books that deal with peace of mind. There were twenty-five different titles. Peace, as presented in the popular writings of the day, lies largely in the realm of the psychological – this I found in thumbing my way through many of the top offerings. Peace is the thing for which the human heart longs above all else. It is at the foot of the cross for you. Why don’t you pick it up?

Access to God

Now my eyes fall upon a second gift for you. Look at its matchless beauty – *access to God!*

By whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand.... (Romans 5:2)

Dr. Griffith Thomas, that great Bible teacher of years ago, made this statement: “Christianity is the religion of access.” I do not know if this impresses you, but do you know that all the religions of the world shut man out from God? Religions are nothing but a maze of ritual and liturgy that have never guaranteed any man’s entrance into the presence of God. In fact, religion stops man and blocks the way until he *does* something or *pays* something.

Even in the Old Testament man did not have access to God. The tabernacle shut man out. There were three entrances, but there were also three closed gates. No ordinary man ever went into the holy of holies. No one but Israel’s high priest ever went there, and he but once a year, and then only with blood according to the specific instructions of Almighty God. A careful study of the tabernacle will reveal the fact that the wonderful Person who came to this earth 2000 years ago actually shut man out from God until He went to the cross and died for the sins of the world.

One of the glorious things of this day in which we live is the fact that we have direct and immediate access to God through the Lord Jesus Christ. Notice this language:

Seeing, then, that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession.... Let us, therefore, come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:14, 16)

And further:

Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh, and having an high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.
(Hebrews 10:19-22)

This, then, is the miracle – a way of access to God!

There is a type of gift that has become quite popular today. It is a unique sort of thoughtfulness in which a friend is presented with a gift certificate by another. The friend then may go to a certain store, present the certificate and purchase up to the specified amount. Today there is at the foot of the cross of Christ a certificate – one which says that you and I may go directly and immediately into God's presence and there find all the grace and help that we need. It would be a terrible thing to receive a gift of credit like that and not use it. How tragic it is to see Christians who have been given access to God and are failing to use it in this hour!

Hope

There is a third gift lying there which I would like to identify for you.

By whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.
(Romans 5:2)

“Hope of the glory of God” – this is the hope that the Scriptures hold out. Paul said to a young preacher by the name of Titus, “Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the

great God and our Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). I don’t think looking for the Great Tribulation is very much of a hope. I’m certainly not looking for it because that would be a dread rather than a hope. To look for the Lord to come and take His church out of this world is a glorious hope, and it will take place at His appearing. Every child of God has this hope. That means he has a future. He has something to look forward to.

Now the “glory of God” is a fearful thing yet to be revealed on this earth. You may recall that when the people of Israel sinned, the glory of God moved through the camp in judgment (see Numbers 16). The glory of God will appear again on this earth. We are told that Christ is coming again, not as a babe in Bethlehem, but in power and great glory. Fix this fact in your mind, and do not dismiss it as something unheard of or something that is unnatural or unreasonable. As our civilization rushes headlong into degrading sins, thoughtful people are asking how long God will let mankind go on like this. Over this earth hangs an ominous thing – the coming of Christ in glory. And the coming of His glory will be a time of great judgment on this earth.

Since you and I have come short of the glory of God, how can we, imperfect and weak as we are, look forward with joy to that day? My friend, after we are justified in God’s sight by simply trusting Jesus Christ, we need not dread the coming of that glory. For He will take us up beforehand:

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air; and so shall we ever be with the Lord. ...For God hath not appointed us to wrath but to obtain salvation by our Lord

Jesus Christ, who died for us that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him. Wherefore, comfort yourselves together... (1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17; 5:9-11)

He will make right all that is wrong in the world today. We are “looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).

The child of God has a hope, a blessed hope. We know that all things are going to “work together for good” (Romans 8:28). We know that *nothing* “shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord” (Romans 8:39). How wonderful that hope is, the blessed hope of the church!

Triumph in Trouble

Looking more closely under God’s Christmas tree, we find another gift, a fourth:

And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also, knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope. (Romans 5:3, 4)

So then, the Christian can glory in tribulation or, to translate it another way, he can rejoice in trouble. This is one of the paradoxes of the Christian faith. The apostle Paul wrote to new Christians in Thessalonica:

And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit. (1 Thessalonians 1:6)

The world dares not join those two words – affliction and joy – but the child of God can boast of the discipline of God. Why? Because he knows that if God has permitted trouble to come to him, it is for his good and God’s glory. “Experience” in Romans 5:4 might better be translated *character*. God is attempting to

develop character in us, and He does it many times through the refining fires of trouble. God does not save us by our character, but He does save us in order to produce character – and that by permitting trouble to arise in our path.

The Greek word used for *character* is the root from which we get our English word *assay*, which means to evaluate. In all the mining towns, years ago, there was the assayer's office. The assayer was a man who could take a piece of ore, examine it by means of a rigorous test, and determine its genuineness. Or perhaps he would discover valuable chemicals to be present. That is exactly what Job meant when he said,

But he knoweth the way that I take; when he hath tested me, I shall come forth as gold. (Job 23:10)

Troubles should not weaken the faith of the believer but, rather, strengthen it. Actually, troubles should produce boldness. The fourth gift is *triumph in trouble* – resulting in patience and character. The final result is hope, which means a super-abounding optimism toward life.

When we see this package under the tree, we pick it up gingerly, but, my friend, it is a gift from God. We can rejoice in trouble.

Love

Next to the fourth gift we discover a very rare gift – the fifth one – “the love of God.”

And hope maketh not ashamed, because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts.... (Romans 5:5)

The general meaning of “shed abroad” is that the love of God gushes forth from your heart as oil from a gusher. The love referred to here has nothing whatsoever to do with human emotion; the love of God is a fruit of the Spirit. It means to love as God

loved when it was said of Him:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

At this time of year the world works up some sentiment about helping folk and breaks out with the so-called Christmas spirit in making donations to this and that cause. This is crass materialism and has all but isolated real Christian love which comes when we seek the face of God. An alabaster box must be broken upon the weary, pathless feet of the world that its perfume might make known the presence of His love through the life of the Christian.

The Holy Spirit

Perhaps the sixth gift of His grace is the greatest!

... The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given unto us. (Romans 5:5)

When you became a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ, He instantly placed your name on this gift – the Holy Spirit. You do not have to seek this gift; you do not have to wait for Him, there is no delay involved. Jesus said, when He was preparing to leave this earth:

And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter; that he may abide with you forever; even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. I will not leave you comfortless; I will come to you. (John 14:16-18)

And He has come to us through the person of the Holy Spirit, who is given to every believer. Notice that “the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given unto

us.” The Holy Spirit alone can actualize the love of God for us in Christ. The indwelling work of the Holy Spirit in the believer is His peculiar work in this age of grace.

Deliverance from Wrath

The last two of these rich gifts are hidden away in Romans 5:9-11. Let us pick them up and look at them rather closely.

Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. (Romans 5:9)

So often folk ask me if I can point them to a verse of Scripture that shows that believers will not go through the Great Tribulation – here is one of many. What is this wrath from which we are saved? Some folk seem to think that the Great Tribulation is like a hurricane that is going to hit the coast of Florida and that you can get in a storm cellar, batten down the hatches, and stay there until it blows over. That, my friend, is a wrong conception of the Great Tribulation. In a former gift I mentioned the wrath or judgment of His glory – it is this to which the Lord refers.

For the great day of his wrath is come, and who shall be able to stand? (Revelation 6:17)

The “cup of iniquity” is being filled up, a stage is being set – as God said it would be – and then the judgments will come on the earth. The Antichrist will come to power, promising the world peace. And the world will believe him. The heart of man, wanting this, will go after the man who promises it, never thinking of turning to Jesus Christ who alone can give peace. They will be deceived – Antichrist will not bring peace, but war. It will be the final conflagration, ending in the battle of Armageddon.

However, Romans 5:9 assures us that we are delivered – we have been saved from the wrath of God to come. If you have been dis-

turbed by some who say that we as believers must go through the Great Tribulation, then I ask you to read the next verse:

For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. (Romans 5:10)

Let us reason clearly: If God was willing to give His Son to die for us when we were enemies of His, don't you know that when we become His children He will see to it that we will not taste of the wrath to come? Christ died to save us from this. What a priceless gift – saved from the wrath to come!

Joy

And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the reconciliation. (Romans 5:11)

We joy in God! I think this is one of the most wonderful statements we have in Scripture. It means that right now, wherever you are, whatever your problems are, my friend, you can joy, rejoice, in God. Just think of it! You can rejoice that He lives and that He is who He is. You can rejoice because He has provided a salvation for us and is willing to save us sinners and bring us into His presence someday.

The word translated “joy” might better be *boast*. We can boast in God, not because of what we are or have. As Paul said, “I am what I am by the grace of God.” But we can boast in Him because of what we have received – the reconciliation or mercy seat.

Jesus told of two men who went up to the temple to pray (see Luke 18:9-14). One was a Pharisee and the other a publican. The Pharisee boasted of his good works. The publican stood way off and beat upon his breast, saying, “God be merciful to me a sinner.”

Why did he beat upon his breast? Because he did not have access to the mercy seat. He had repudiated his nation and his God when he became a publican. He was an outcast, and all he could do was stand on the outside and cry, "God be merciful." Actually, the word for mercy is *mercy seat* – that place in the temple where every instructed Israelite knew there was blood sprinkled which gave him access to God. In our day, Christ is that mercy seat; He is the propitiation for our sins.

When you unwrap the package marked *joy*, you will find in it God's mercy seat.

Reconciliation produces joy, friend, real joy. He has worked out a plan to save us because of His love for us. Isn't that enough to make you rejoice? Oh, the child of God should have joy in his heart. I love the song, "Let's Just Praise the Lord." These are eight wonderful benefits of salvation. Let's just praise the Lord!

* * * * *

During World War I a British detachment had been cut off from the main forces in the front lines. They had gone out to explore and were caught in the terrific fire of the enemy. Their communication line had remained open but finally was severed by a shell. The captain called for a volunteer who would trace the line to the point of trouble, bring it together and tie it. He warned that it would be a dangerous assignment. Several volunteered and one was chosen. He crawled into no-man's-land and followed the wire. Finally he found one end in a shell hole, and feeling around in the mud, he discovered the other end. But he could not bring the ends in a position to tie them, for the enemy had him under fire by now. He just lay there and held the two wires together so that communication was restored. However a shell fell close to him

and exploded. He was killed, yet the communication was not disturbed. The next day after victory they found this man frozen in death, one line locked in his right hand, the other in his left hand, and through his body the message had been passing.

Two thousand years ago there came down from heaven One who restored communication through a line that had been broken by sin. He laid hold of God because He was God, and He laid hold of man because He was man. He could not make the connection by His life; it was made when He died on the cross.

The British government took a picture of that man performing his duty in death, and underneath they put only one word:
CONTACT!

Today our contact with God is through Jesus Christ. These eight glorious gifts are the result of this contact, for the cross of Christ, you see, is God's Christmas tree.

