

Did Christ Die for Me, “Above All?”

At Easter we sing hymns and praise songs to remember the Atonement and celebrate Christ’s resurrection. While the time-tested hymns such as O SACRED HEAD NOW WOUNDED, CHRIST THE LORD IS RISEN TODAY, or even the spiritual, WERE YOU THERE, have proven their worth both musically and theologically, a less than desirable song has recently crept its way into many congregations. In the late 1990’s Lenny LeBlanc & Paul Baloche wrote a song called ABOVE ALL. This song gets frequent airtime on Christian radio stations as a result of its popularity on Michael W. Smith’s album, *Worship*. While the majority of the lyrics are quite good, the final lines discredit all that comes before. In fact, the song’s conclusion is illogical based on the previous two verses. Most importantly, it presents a skewed view of Christ’s motive for dying on the cross.

ABOVE ALL’s message, at least in the first two stanzas, is simply that Jesus Christ is above all things. This is the Apostle Paul’s point in Colossians 1:16, “For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers of authorities—*all things have been created by Him and for Him.*” The first two stanzas of ABOVE ALL express marvelous truths about Christ.

He is preeminently above all powers or kings; this fact is testified throughout Scripture. The conclusion at the end of Matthew’s Gospel pronounces, “All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me.” Christ’s title in the Apocalypse is “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” (Revelation 19:6). He is the greatest King and Lord, and all authority belongs to Him. No power or king, earthly or otherwise, can usurp Christ’s authority. In response to Pilate’s inquiry during Jesus’ trial, He states, “You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has *the* greater sin.” The only reason Pilate *seems* to have power over Christ is that God the Father granted it in order to accomplish His greater purpose (John 19:11).

Even the laws of nature are subject to Christ’s authority. One can only imagine the disciples’ amazement as He calmed storms, multiplied five fish and two loaves of bread, glided across water, and, most importantly, left the grave once and for all. Truly Christ is not subject to the laws of gravity, physics, or nature.

Christ’s wisdom is equally unfathomable. The prophet Isaiah recorded, “‘My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways.’” The cross typifies this incomparable wisdom (1 Co 1:18-25). The first stanza of ABOVE ALL closes with the affirmation that Christ “was here before the world began.” The Incarnation was not the beginning of His existence; rather, it initiated His humanity. Jesus has always existed.

The second stanza repeats the ideas found in the first stanza, adding that Christ's worthiness is immeasurable. This fact is most evident since "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10-11). Imagine the sound of heaven resonating with the marvelous song in Revelation 5:12: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." From a human perspective, His worth is connected to the perfect redemption accomplished at Calvary. As our perfect substitute, He died in our place, demonstrating the greatest love and grace ever known. Our salvation rests upon His merit, not our own, since He alone bore the wrath that we justly deserve.

The images in the refrain convey the suffering and death of Christ. The authors correctly recognize that Christ came to die. In His death He rendered Himself a guilt offering in order to justify many (Isa 53:10). The poignant comparison of a rose being trampled to Christ being crucified conveys some sense of the situation's pathos.

Despite all the good that precedes it, the refrain's conclusion poses a serious theological problem. That Christ "took the fall and thought of me above all" is a tragic misunderstanding of His purpose. It is this gross man-centeredness that has led some to a mistaken view of Christ's death and man's importance.

Many fail to realize that Jesus Christ was promised glory exceeding that of any other. Hebrews 12:2 calls us to "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who *for the joy set before Him endured the cross*, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." The promised reward—sitting at the right hand of God the Father—who would not die for that privilege? The Christ Hymn in Philippians 2 also teaches that because of His sufferings, God [the Father] highly exalted Him, "so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Because of His obedience to the point of death, Christ deserves all praise and commands all authority. The Book of Revelation teems with images of the enthroned Lamb immersed in the heavenly hosts' unceasing praises. His greatness and worthiness enamors all of His creatures! In view of His gruesome crucifixion, vividly portrayed in *The Passion of the Christ*, how could Christ have willingly suffered so horrific a death without some promise of reward (cf. Isaiah 52:13; 53:12)?

That Christ "thought of me, above all" when He died is also a bit sentimental in light of the first two stanzas. LeBlanc and Baloché present the Lord as the highest and mightiest of all existence, yet their clever ending is trite when juxtaposed against this noble characterization of Christ. They could have concluded with a statement summarizing or elevating Christ's greatness. Their failed attempt to conclude the song with the theme of "above all" demonstrates an adolescent, man-centered theology.

I find no evidence in Scripture that He was thinking of individual persons as much as His Body. The Bible usually views salvation corporately. A reading of Romans, Hebrews, or 1 Peter illustrates the corporate nature of salvation. The authors refer to His dying for *us*, not *me*. Christ died to save the elect, those whom He chose (Jn 13:18). Our purpose is to “declare the praise of His glory,” to be a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession” (1 Pet 2:9). Christ graciously included me in His Body that we might join countless others in breathing His praises and forwarding His mission. A proper view of the Christian life and calling is communal, with past, present, and future saints, both local and worldwide.

Make no mistake, Christ died out of love for us. In fact, His death is the definitive act of love: “We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (1 Jn 3:16). The error being addressed is that of elevating man’s and particularly my own place in Christ’s mind when He died. Can I be so presumptuous as to think that Christ was thinking about me as He was beaten and crucified? Can I not live in light of the greatness of my salvation without overstating my indispensability to Him?

In conclusion, the authors introduced a wonderful picture of Christ in this song until they presumed to answer why He died. We must not be sentimental with an event of such magnitude; rather we must exercise the greatest caution to preserve, as best as human words can, the wonder of the Cross. I know that Christ loves me more than I can ever comprehend, and that His death has benefits that exceed my wildest imagination. In the cross I find my purpose for existence and means by which I can serve Christ. In this I must make much of His grace without making much of myself.