

Songs of the Cross: *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*

Darrell Buchanan, Gravelbourg Church of Christ, March 20, 2022

Introduction

In 2013, Paul Kalanithi was on his way to becoming a neurosurgeon at Stanford University when he was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer.

He'd just turned 36.

Kalanithi began to write, and his memoir was eventually published as the book [When Breath Becomes Air](#).

- In it, he recites the words his oncologist shared with him as he reckoned with his impending death: *"This is not the end. Or even the beginning of the end. This is just the end of the beginning."*
- Kalanithi, who was raised in a Christian home, strayed from faith, but seemed to have found God again during his final years, died in March 2015.

The words of Kalanithi's oncologist ring true in light of the gospel.

For followers of Jesus, death is not the end, or even the beginning of the end.

It is simply the end of the beginning and the beginning of eternity.

While most Christians intellectually believe this to be true, our avoidance of death and even the talk of death seems to betray that belief.

This is in part because, as American anthropologist Anita Hannig [observes](#), "[T]he end of life has become so medicalized that death is often viewed as a failure, rather than as an expected stage of life."

Our cultural fixation on pleasure has conditioned us largely to ignore, deny, and even try to subvert death.

As a result, we fail to ponder, deeply consider, and look upon it.

We forget the psalmist's call to recognize with our own limitations and the finitude of this life as we "number our days" ([Psalm 90:12](#)).

Songs of the Cross

Before we begin the journey toward Easter Sunday and celebrate the resurrection of our Lord, we must first confront the reality that, as human beings, we are dust and will one day die.

In other words, before we arrive at the Resurrection, we must first confront the Cross.

Confronting the cross and considering the depth of Jesus' love that led him to die for me and for the whole world can leave us at a loss for words.

But God has given us hymns and songs for those times when our words feel meagre and inadequate.

And, as we sing and contemplate them, hymns and songs help us enter into the meaning of Christ's sacrifice.

They express the Good News that reverberates even in the darkest moments of Jesus' suffering and death — and in the darkest moments of our own lives.

One such hymn is Isaac Watts's "[When I Survey the Wondrous Cross](#)."

When I Survey the Wondrous Cross was first published in 1707 and it may be the most well known of all the songs he wrote.

It was originally composed as a Communion hymn, and that is typically how it is used even today.

At least part of the inspiration for the lyrics are Paul's words in [Galatians 6:14](#).

The clearest parallel is in the first line of the second verse — "Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast save in the death of Christ, my God!"

Surveying the Cross is an invitation to **contemplate** death and, according to the hymn, to begin the journey toward clarity.

So, Watts starts with contemplation of the cross and the fact that all our worldly achievements and possessions pale in comparison.

Next, he shows that Christ went to the cross out of love for us.

In the most powerful image of the hymn, he affirms the divinity of the suffering Christ with the brilliant juxtaposition: "Did e'er such love and sorrow meet, Or thorns compose so rich a crown?"

And the last verse shows that the only proper response to this amazing love is complete devotion.

The theme of dying to the world and to earthly longings at the cross of Christ is sprinkled throughout the hymn:

*My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

*All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.*

The Cross is the great revealer, exposing the temporary stuff of earth and upending human value systems.

Worldly riches, pride in our self-sufficiency, vain pursuits and more lose their splendor and shine in the shadow of the Cross.

As our gaze begins to shift away from the deceptive sheen of earthly pleasures and toward the wondrous cross of Christ, and we see “sorrow and love flow mingled down,” we are faced with the question, “Did e’er such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown?”

And eventually, we’re compelled toward the reality that a “love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”

Secularism tells us that, ultimately, there is only life and death.

And culture at large is at the ready, offering us endless temporary pleasures designed to keep our eyes fixed on shallow versions of the present.

Contemplating the Cross is a way of breaking free from the short-sightedness of secularism in order to live more fully into the hopeful, eternal story unfolding in the present and awaiting us in the future.

We’re reminded that all of this — delights and pleasures, life and breath — is transitory and fleeting.

This is the gift we receive when we survey the Cross — the gift of a spot-on scale by which to measure, with precision and perspective, our values system, and to consider what truly matters and what doesn’t.

Steadiness amid suffering comes from a cross-shaped vision for all of life and eternity.

It’s a vision acquired only and always through a deep and consistent contemplation of the Cross.

It’s a vision that reveals to us that the crucified, resurrected, and ascended Christ is here, now, with us, guiding us toward a future where there are no more tears, death, mourning, crying, or pain (Rev.

21:4).

In the words of Paul in [Romans 14:8–9](#):

If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

As we survey the wondrous cross, we come to know ever more deeply that:

“It is not the end.

It is not even the beginning of the end.

It is only the end of the beginning.”

When you sing or listen to “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” which phrase or line most draws your attention?

Watts’s hymn declares, “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”

How are you going to respond to Jesus?