

## **The Cross of Christ 3-19-17**

### **The Necessity of the Cross**

We focus this morning on the cross of Christ. The cross whereupon He died. It was a Roman cross to be sure, and He was nailed there by Roman soldiers at the behest of the Jewish leaders, but we must never forget that Jesus died there because He chose to. That does not mean He wanted to - not any more than a soldier wants to risk his life in combat. But like the committed soldier there were desires at work in Jesus that were stronger, greater, deeper than His desire to avoid the pain and abandonment, even the hell of Calvary. What those desires were is important for us to understand.

The cross is central to the mission of Jesus. It was not the end of His mission so much as it was the heart of His mission, the crux of it all. It was crucial. And you may notice in those last two sentences I use words: crux, crucial, words like excruciating that come from the Latin word for cross. Crux in our language is defined as a main or central feature. In spite of all that He had done in three years of teaching and healing and training, when Jesus entered the garden of Gethsemane to pray on that fateful Thursday evening He didn't look back on a mission accomplished - He looked ahead to what He called His *hour*. Within fifteen hours He would be stretched out on a cross. Within 24 He would be dead and buried. And He knew it. The mission of a lifetime, of 30-35 years would be accomplished in its last 24 hours, indeed its last six. Go with me then, into the Garden of Christ's agony to hear what He says to us from that place. Matthew 26:**37-39** *And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed. 38 Then He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me."* 39 *And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will."* John, chapter 18, minutes later John 18:**3-11**

*Judas then, having received the Roman cohort and officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. 4 So Jesus, knowing all the things that were coming upon Him, went forth and said to them, "Whom do you seek?" 5 They answered Him, "Jesus the Nazarene." He said to them, "I am He." And Judas also, who was betraying Him, was standing with them. 6 So when He said to them, "I am He," they drew back and fell to the ground. 7 Therefore He again asked them, "Whom do you seek?" And they said, "Jesus the Nazarene." 8 Jesus answered, "I told you that I am He; so if you seek Me, let these go their way," 9 to fulfill the word which He spoke, "Of those whom You have given Me I lost not one." 10 Simon Peter then, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear; and the slave's*

*name was Malchus. 11 So Jesus said to Peter, "Put the sword into the sheath; the cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?"*

The “cup” - a metaphor for His destiny, His calling, His duty. That cup filled with sin and wrath and hell. That cup demanded a horrible death that was more than a death, it was a divine abandonment. That cup, Jesus politely requested, if it were possible, to have removed from Him. As He requested this, He submitted Himself anew to the Father’s will, and the words of Jesus in John 18 tell us that the Father did not will the cup away. His own beautiful, perfect, worthy weeping son He did not spare, but delivered Him up to death for us all. He handed Him the cup and said, “Drink it.” Why? What made it necessary for Jesus to die like this? Why was it not possible to remove that cup?

The necessity of the cross is where we are going today. And I’m still in the introduction, asking the question - was the cross simply the best way God knew to save sinners, or was it the only way? What do you think? I saw a movie one time that said, “If God had wanted to He could have skipped the incarnation and the death of Jesus, He could have just created a big rock, the Salvation Rock, and declared that the first million persons to touch it get into heaven.” The movie then went on to suggest that such a salvation would not have been best, that the cross was an even better way. But is that really the way it is? Jesus asked, “If it is possible, take the cup from Me.” But the cup stayed with Jesus, and we conclude that removing it was seen by the Father as impossible. The garden cry of Jesus leaves us to believe that there was no alternative route that would lead to our salvation. Jesus realized this. John 12:27 *Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour.* The cross, the atoning death in the place of sinners; the abandonment by the Father - all this makes up the only way whereby lost sinners can be restored to God. And we want to see now why that is so - and it is so because of the nature of man and the nature of God. Let’s look at those separately as we consider first why the nature of man makes the cross necessary.

Man is not by original nature, but is, by cursed and fallen nature, a sinner. You’ve probably noticed this. Certainly, if you have read the Bible you know this truth. You know that men are lawbreakers, rebels and from the beginning of time God has set forth sanctions against sinners. In Genesis God told Adam - if you eat of the forbidden fruit you shall what? You shall die on the day you eat of it. Death always, always has been the reward, the consequence, of sin for the simple reason that such is justice. Sin is not the little peccadillo that we see it as being. It is nothing less

than cosmic treason. It is ugly and horrible. It deserves death, and the Bible everywhere says that is what it gets. Romans 6:**23a** *The wages of sin is death.* No matter how the Bible talks about sin that is where it leads. The Scriptures describe our sin problem in three different ways. As a debt that needs paying, as a crime that needs punishing and as a wall of separation that needs removal. Our debt calls for death. Our crime demands death. Our separation from God is death. Now to say the least this is a problem. We owe a debt. Not an unfamiliar problem for some of you. Many of you owe debts don't you? And you don't worry about that. You will just tighten the belt, save up and pay that thing off. That is how many view their debt of sin. I can handle it. I'll do better tomorrow and work that debt off. But that attitude reveals a fatal misunderstanding of sin. The debt of sin is not like owing your buddy \$100 bucks. It is like owing the government \$5 billion, with a new million added every day. It is a debt of impossible magnitude. That is why Galatians 2:**16** *A man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.* In other words, nobody is going to find forgiveness for their great efforts at doing well. Romans 3, the great chapter dealing with our sin problem, notes in **20** *By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.* And thru the law comes the knowledge of what to do about that sin - and the answer has always been - sacrifice. Sacrifice. Another word to associate with sacrifice is *substitute*. Sacrifices for sin are substitutes that die in the place of the sinner. In the book of Leviticus, the Old Testament priests are given detailed instruction about the sacrifices they were to offer. Leviticus 17:**11** *The life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement.* Think back now. What is the wages of sin? What does sin require? Death - the ending of a life. And the message of Scripture is that your sin demands a life, your sin calls for, requires a death and it will either be your own or it will be the God-ordained sacrifice. Hebrews 9:**22** *According to the Law, one may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.* A salvation rock won't cut it. Our sin demands more than that. It needs blood and not just anyone's blood. It had to be the Son of God's blood. Two reasons: One, it had to be a sinless person's. If the human sacrifice isn't sinless then his death is for his own sin, not for others. Secondly, it had to be an infinite person, since our debt of sin, being against an infinite God, is also

infinite. What's the point? If we are to be forgiven our sin then Jesus, the God-man had to die to pay the price of that sin. And He did die for us.

Then there is the other reason the cross was necessary. It was necessary because of the nature of God. Some would venture to suggest that when we say that God cannot save without the cross we impugn His power. We read that God's power enables Him to do whatever He wants to do. But God is limited (yes, I say that reverently) God is limited by the perfections of His own character. Titus 1:2 tells us that God cannot lie. What can God not do? Lie. Why not? Because He is intrinsically righteous, holy and truthful. He cannot act contrary to His own perfect nature. And in addition to being truthful, God is also just. In God's court, justice must be done. Now, I tell you sadly, with that statement I have set myself apart from much of Christendom. For so many the wonderful truths about God's mercy have eclipsed the equally strong teaching about God's holiness and justice and wrath. But let me tell ya, the cross makes no sense unless God is committed to justice. Hear that again. The cross makes no sense unless God is committed to justice. The Son looked into the cup of His suffering and said, "Father, isn't there another way?" But there wasn't - why not? Because God is all love, love, love? No. What explains the impossibility of our salvation without Christ's suffering is the reality that God is also just and must punish sin. Exodus 34:7 God says He cannot leave guilt unpunished. Habakkuk 1:13 says His eyes are too pure to look upon iniquity. He has promised death for sin. Is God bound by His word? Absolutely. Therefore, it would seem impossible for God to grant eternal life to sinners. But He does, thru the miracle of substitution and atonement. Carnegie Simpson says "forgiveness is to man the plainest of duties; to God it is the profoundest of problems." But a solution was found.

Paul set the stage for Romans chapter 3 by spending the previous two uncovering the full problem of sin. In chapter 1 he said the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. Then in Romans chapter 3:**10-11** *THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE; 11 THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD*. In other words, everyone is liable to this divine wrath. That's the problem of the gospel, now here comes the solution 3:**23-25a** *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; 25 whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith*. What is that? That propitiation thing? That is a provision for the appeasement or satisfaction of one's anger, in this case, God's. Paul had already told us that our holy God was angry about sin. What He says here is that Christ

bore the brunt of that anger. He was our propitiation—the willing fall guy - the one blamed and punished for what we did. And look at the rest of verse **25b-26** *This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; 26 for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.* That verse is profound. Please understand it before you leave. Paul is marveling, that in His wisdom and mercy, God found a way to do two things. One is to display His justice, His righteousness, as a just God who does punish sin. The other is to display His love as a saving God who rescues fallen creatures from their due punishment. The cross meets the need. The cross tells us how a holy just God can pardon unholy sinners. It is because the debt is paid, the due punishment of the law has been satisfied and the enmity between God and man is no more. All of that happened at Calvary. Listen to John Murray, “*It is this inviolable sanctity of God’s law, the immutable dictate of holiness and the unflinching demand of justice that makes mandatory the conclusion that salvation from sin without expiation and propitiation is inconceivable.*” The cross was necessary because God is just and God is love, and at the cross love and justice kiss. The cross becomes therefore, not only the greatest testimony to the love of God, it also is the greatest testimony to His holiness, His justice.

Why did Jesus say from the cross, “My God, My God, why hast Thou abandoned Me?” Why did He face death with such fear and trepidation, rather than the courage and calm you would expect from a great man? Because, as He hung there dying on the cross, not just the wrath of Rome and Jerusalem was being poured out on Him, but the wrath of heaven as well. Isaiah 53:**5-6** *He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. 6 All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.* On that awesome day, you may recall, even the skies grew dark as an outward symbol of what was happening. Darkness in Scripture represents separation from God who is light. Outer darkness is a term used for hell. When Christ died darkness fell for three hours in the middle of the day. Douglas Webster wrote, “At the birth of the son of God there was brightness at midnight; at His death there was darkness at noon.” For in those hours the penalty of your sin, and my sin was being paid by the eternal Lamb of God. Why? For your sake, yes, but also for the sake of God, for whom the cross was the only way to express both His great love and His great holiness, to make Him both just and the justifier of those with faith in Jesus.

The cross therefore enforces three truths about ourselves, about God, about salvation. First, it shows that our sin must be extremely horrible. Nothing reveals the weight of sin like the cross. When you are prone to see your sin as so small, so insignificant, hardly worth an apology, remember that God sees it as so great that only a divine death could make it right.

Secondly, the cross shows that the love of God is wonderful beyond comprehension. Consider this true story. In Brazil, authorities uncovered a strange plot. It seems that a man named Denival Santos was guilty of impersonating Rene Honorato. Strangely, Mr. Honorato was a convicted criminal, sentenced to six years in prison. Who would want to impersonate him? Well, Mr. Santos owed money to Honorato and agreed that, in lieu of payment, he would serve his prison sentence in his place and they managed to fool the authorities regarding his identity. Fascinating! The debtor taking the punishment due his creditor. But in the gospel, in the Jesus story, we have the Creditor taking the place of the debtor. We owe Him a great debt that we could never pay, and so great is His love that He, the Offended Holy One, takes the punishment of rotten sinners like us. Amazing. When Paul looked for an argument to show how much God loves us He went to the cross and said in Romans 8:32 *He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?* And His conclusion seven verses later is that nothing can separate us from a love like that. In his first year out of college, our son Andrew did a year-long mission stint with Campus Crusade in Sarajevo, Bosnia. One day we read with great interest an email from he sent us from there. He wrote this: *Last week, for the first time in over 2 1/2 years, we had a student announce to us that he had turned his life over to God and accepted Christ Jesus as His Savior. The students name is Daniel. He is Croatian in ethnicity but his family religion is communism. Daniel has been involved with Svakistudent for about a year and a half. For a large part of this year he and I have been meeting to study the Bible together. Last week I had us read together through Romans 2, but after we had finished Romans 2 Daniel kept wanting to read more. We ended up reading chapters 2-9 in Romans and spending quite a while discussing the issues that Paul brings up in those passages. A few days later I met with Daniel again and he told me that he asked for Jesus to live in his heart. Daniel, who was abused by his parents growing up and was generally unloved by them, said that the most amazing thing to him was realizing that Christ loved him enough to die on the cross for him.* End quote. How awesome is that! And how proper it is to be blown away by the love of that one who gave Himself on the cross.

Thirdly, the cross shows that salvation must be a free gift. Jesus purchased it at the price of His blood. What is there left to pay? How dare we suggest that our Lord's cry, "It is finished!" was mistaken, and that there are still points left that we must earn. It's a killer to our pride, but salvation is all of Jesus, all of Him. He is the righteous Judge who sitting upon His throne declares us guilty of a capital offense. He too is the loving Savior who steps off His throne and accepts that death in our place, fulfilling the requirements of His holy law and the passions of His loving heart for sinners. All we can do is sit back and wonder, in amazement at such a love. I love that hymn of Watts: *"Alas, and did my Savior bleed, and did my Sovereign die? Would He devote that sacred head for sinners such as I? Was it for crimes that I have done He groaned upon a tree? Amazing pity, grace unknown and love beyond degree. Well might the sun in darkness hide and shut his glories in, when God the mighty Maker died, for man, the creature's sin."* And then Watt's does offer a suggested response to all this: *"But drops of grief, can ne'er repay the debt of love I owe; here Lord, I give myself away, tis all that I can do."*