

On April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1974, in Bloomington, Illinois, I scheduled my dear friend Dr. Herbert Kane, a professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, to preach our Good Friday Communion Service at The Evangelical Free Church of Bloomington, Normal. When his wife became ill, he called me, saying, “I must stay home with my sick wife. You have heard me preach on the cross. You preach the message I was going to preach. I thank God for this man of God gone Home to Glory. I preached that night on the cross, and I come tonight to preach on it again.

## **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CROSS OF JESUS**

Luke 23:33 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

The cross of Jesus Christ is perhaps the strangest spectacle that the world has ever seen. Here was a man who claimed to be the only begotten and well-beloved Son of God, and He is crying out in the anguish of His heart, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” Here is a man that claimed to possess all power in heaven and in earth and yet, He is being put to death at the hands of His own creatures, crucified as Paul said, “in weakness.” Here is a man who by universal consent was the world’s greatest benefactor and he is dying on the cross between two malefactors—the strangest spectacle the world has ever seen. Now such a strange spectacle must, of necessity, carry with it a tremendous amount of significance. What is the significance of the cross of Christ? I would like to make three suggestions, the first of which is found in Acts 4: 24-28. Remember, these are the disciples Peter and John after they have been set free—they gather with their own company. They lifted up their voices to God with one accord and said, “O Lord, it is Thou who didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them, who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father, David, Thy servant, didst say, “Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples devise futile things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against His Christ, For truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur.” The first significance of the cross is:

### **THE CROSS WAS THE REALIZATION OF GOD’S ETERNAL PLAN AND PURPOSE.**

(I.) Now whatever else you may think about the cross, the cross was certainly not an afterthought on the part of God. It was not a stop-gap measure introduced when the original plan fell through. Long before the creation of the world, long before the advent of time, or the fall of man, God devised a way by which He would redeem the human race here on this earth. At the very center of that plan was the cross of Christ. It was no afterthought on God’s part. Now

nobody knew this better than our Lord Himself. Time and time again He took His disciples aside and told them exactly what was going to happen. They refused to come to terms with the idea. At any place along the way, by an act of His own will, Jesus could have altered the whole course of events and secured His own life. He refused to make that kind of move. 1. One miracle in Herod's presence might have satisfied his idle curiosity and secured his royal favor. Jesus refused to work that miracle. One word of flattery in Pilate's judgment hall and Jesus might have been a free man. He refused to speak that word. One brief prayer and Jesus would have had at his command more than 12 legions of angels. Now a legion in the Roman army was 6,000 soldiers. 12 legions would be 72,000 flaming angels. Imagine what Jesus could have done with 72,000 flaming angels. Imagine the first born in the land of Egypt. It only took two angels to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah off the face of the earth. Imagine what would have happened had Jesus prayed that prayer for 72,000 flaming angels. In a moment of time, Jesus could have taken care of Pilate, Caiaphas, and Caesar himself—but He refused to offer that prayer. Why? It was because He knew that the cross was part of God's eternal plan and purpose.

2. And in that whole trial and crucifixion scene, our Lord is the only man who is at peace with Himself. Everyone is in a state of confusion. The high priest rents his clothes. Pilate washes his hands to try to get rid of his guilt. Pilate's wife tosses to and fro all night on a sleepless bed. Even the disciples are confused, and don't know what to do or where to turn. Jesus is the only man in that whole scene who knows what it's all about. When it looked as though the end had come and He would fall into the hands of His enemy, Peter lifted his sword out of his sheath. He lashed out at the enemy. Jesus would have none of it. "Peter, put up thy sword into its sheath. The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?" These are perhaps the most precious and wonderful words in the whole of the New Testament. And a few hours later, when Jesus stood in Pilate's judgment hall, He refused to speak up even on His own behalf though He was accused of all sorts of false accusations. When this happened, the big man became just a little irritated. He said, "Answerest Thou nothing? Knowest Thou not that I have power to crucify Thee or release Thee?" And Jesus answered Pilate, "Thou couldest have no power against Me, except it were given thee from above." Now Pilate, in his official robes that day, was the personification of the greatest power on earth at that time. One word from Pilate and a man's doom was sealed. The signing of a death warrant was a regular part of a normal day's routine. It took only a couple of minutes. It seemed all so simple as far as Pilate was concerned. That's why he said to Jesus, "You'd better speak up." But there was one thing that day that Pilate didn't know, and that is that the man who stood before him was no ordinary man. That man was the Son of God, who in the incarnation became the Son of man that through His

death at the hands of Pontius Pilate, He might become the Savior of the world. All that Pilate and Caiaphas, the Jews, and the Romans did was to accomplish God's eternal plan and purpose. The death of this man could only be brought about in God's time and in God's way and with God's consent. It was not a mere incident in human history. No, it was the realization of God's eternal plan and purpose. In the second place, I invite you to turn with me to I John 4: 9,10. "By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

**THE CROSS WAS THE MANIFESTATION OF GOD'S LOVE.** (II.) This was in a very unique way. Now it's very easy for you and me, with 2,000 years of church history behind us and the New Testament books open before us to believe in the love of God or the God of love. But it wasn't quite as simple for the people in Jesus' day. The concept of a God of love or the love of God was almost unknown in that day, even among the Jews. Now the Jews knew a good deal about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They had been favored above all peoples of the earth and God had committed the oracles to them. They were the recipients of God's special revelation. To them belonged the law and the prophets, the covenants and the promises, the sanctuary with its Shekinah glory, the synagogues scattered throughout the land—all of this was part of their spiritual heritage. But what did they know about the love of God?--Not very much. The outstanding attribute of God as revealed in the Old Testament was not love. It was righteousness and this they understood quite clearly. God was a holy God whose law could not be broken except on pain of death. To them the greatest event was the event of Sinai. God was the God of Sinai and His Word could not be broken. They didn't know much about the love of God, not even the Jews. And if the Jews knew very little, what shall we say for the pagan Gentile world of that day? They knew nothing whatever. Remember what the apostle Paul had to say in Romans 1 about a time when they knew God. Turn with me to verses 21-23. "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures." Paul might have gone on to say sticks and stones for that's where they ended up. What did they know about a God of love? Precisely, nothing!

So then—1. We can examine the non-Christian religions of the world today—the greatest of them, and you will search in vain for any trace of a God of love. The

Hindus have 330 million gods, most are gods of lust, not love. The ancient Greeks had 30,000 gods, again, gods of lust. The Mohammedans have a rosary of 99 beads each representing a different name of Allah, but the name Father does not occur among the 99. The idea of a God of love is foreign. And what shall we say about modern man? What does he know about a God of love or the love of God?—Again, not very much. We look around us—what do we see in the place of love? Hate—all you have to do is read your daily newspaper. And so we read that Stalin in his day, sent 15 million of his people to death in the labor camps of Siberia. Nobody knows how many people Mao Tse Tung killed in China. Hitler sent 6 million Jews to the gas chambers in Germany in World War II. When the Japanese invaded China, they took the city of Nanking. They were given 72 hours of complete freedom. They acted more like beasts than like men, mowing down the women and children and they took the little babies and threw them into the air and caught them on the way down on the end of their bayonets. So in looking even at modern man, you don't see too much evidence of a God of love.

2. Where then do we as Christians get this notion that God is love?—Not out of a history book, a philosophy book, or an encyclopedia. Where do we get this notion that God is love? There is only one place where we can discover a God of love, and that is at the cross, And if we don't find the love of God or the God of love at the cross, it is because He will not be found. Notice again I John 4: 9,10. ““By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” If we love God today, it is because He first loved us. Now if the cross of Christ is a fact of history, and we have no reason to believe it isn't, then in spite of all evidence to the contrary, we can rest absolutely sure that this topsy-turvy world of ours, indeed, this universe of ours, is in the hands of a God whose heart is love, and whose love, love like Himself, is eternal and unchangeable. The hymn writer wrote, “See from His head, His hands, His feet, Sorrow and love flow mingled down...Did ere' such love and sorrow meet, nor thorns compose so rich a crown.” Jesus said, in John 3: 16, “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.” So a poet has written, “There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea. There's a kindness in His justice that is more than liberty. For the love of God is broader than the measure of man's mind and the heart of the eternal is most wonderfully kind.” And we know that one foundational fact because we have been to the cross. I now invite you to turn with me to the third passage I wish to share with you before we share the Lord's Supper on this Good Friday. This third passage is Romans 3: 23-26. I read, “For all have sinned and fall

short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God, He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” The cross of Christ is not only (1) the realization of God’s eternal plan and purpose. The cross is not only (2) the manifestation of God’s love. Thirdly and lastly,

### **THE CROSS IS THE DECLARATION OF GOD’S RIGHTEOUSNESS. (III.)**

This is one aspect of the cross that we tend to overlook and play down, but it is a very important aspect of the cross. I said, a moment ago, that God’s greatest attribute as revealed in the Old Testament was the attribute of righteousness. This comes through loud and clear, especially in the Psalms. Righteousness is the very foundation of God’s throne and whatever else God is, He must be righteous or He simply would not be God. So He is a holy God, a righteous God and righteousness and judgment are the very foundation of His throne. He is holy in all His ways and righteous, the Psalmist says, in all His works. Now every Jew who knew His Bible knew that this was the outstanding attribute of God—righteousness. Abraham had said, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? He will act righteously; He will never act un-righteously.” Well, the Jews of that day must have asked or at least thought a very embarrassing question. (1) How can God be righteous and yet have fellowship with unrighteous men without violating His righteousness? This is the great theological question of the Old Testament. How can a man be just with God? God is just; man is unjust. God is holy; man is sinful. How can a man be just with God? How can God in all His majesty, His holiness, and His righteousness, ever have fellowship with unrighteous men? And some of the Jews, certainly the thinking Jews of the Old Testament must have asked this. Take even the greatest men of the Old Testament, not one of them was perfect. Even Noah, the one man of his generation who found grace in God’s sight, when the flood was all over, he went out and planted a vineyard and got dead drunk. And in his drunken stupor, he simply exposed himself, but he was the only man of his day who found grace in the eyes of a righteous God. And Abraham, of all the people in the Bible, this man is called the friend of God, and on at least 2 occasions, he lied concerning the identity of his wife. He said, “She’s not my wife. She’s my sister,”—which was only half true. This man was the friend of God. God had strange friends in those days, didn’t He? Moses was the only man in the Old Testament who communed with God face to face as a man communes with his friend. After 40 days on the mountain face to face with God, yet one day in a fit of temper, he struck the rock instead of speaking to it and he couldn’t even enter the Promised Land.—the greatest of them all, not

quite perfect. And when Joshua took the city of Jericho, do you remember what happened there? The whole city was destroyed, except one woman and her family were saved. She was the most upright and moral person in the city, was she? No, she was a harlot, was a prostitute. She was a woman of the street. She was the one who was saved while all the others were destroyed. And as if that were not bad enough, she became one of the ancestresses of our Lord Himself and her name appears in the genealogical table there in Matthew 1. And what shall we say about King David?--Greatest of all the kings, the man that God picked to be the king, the only man in the Old Testament of whom God could say, "Here is a man after My own heart." And he was a perfect man, was he? Hardly; he was neither a perfect man nor a perfect king. One day, he spied a woman in the neighboring courtyard who was bathing herself. Lust took possession of his heart and mind. Carried away in a torrent of lustful passion, he said, "I will have this woman for myself. The fact that she belonged to another man, Uriah, didn't make any difference; this didn't cramp his style one little bit. He took that woman; she became his wife. And then, in an effort to cover up his sin of adultery, he conveniently arranged for Uriah the Hittite, to be killed at the front. So he used murder to cover up adultery. And this is the man—this is the man of whom it is said, "Here is a man after God's own heart." So we are forced to ask, "What kind of God is this in the Old Testament? He claims to be righteous, a holy God. He cannot look upon iniquity. He cannot overlook sin and yet He socializes and fraternizes with men like Noah, Abraham, David, and Moses—this is a real moral problem of the Old Testament.

Now what is the answer? (2) There was even in the Old Testament a partial answer. When a man sinned, he could take a lamb and he could kill the lamb. He could make a blood sacrifice, an offering to this righteous and holy God. But the thinking Jew of that day, as anybody today must have known that in the final analysis, that whole system of sacrifice could never ever really do the trick. As a temporary measure, it met a real need. It covered the sin for the time being. It did not make any attempt to expiate, to atone for that sin. It was like the giving of a promissory note. It acknowledged the indebtedness. It did not settle the account. And as a basic principle, it was immoral. They must have known as we know now that it is not possible for the blood of bulls and of goats to take away sin. And yet the sacrificial system went on day after day, century after century until the whole vast system threatened to collapse under its own weight. It simply was not enough. As one man penned it. "Not all the blood of beasts and Jewish altars slain could give the guilty conscience peace or take away its stain. But Christ the heavenly Lamb takes all our guilt away,--A sacrifice of nobler name and richer blood than they." When God appeared to pass over the sin of Noah, Abraham, Moses, Rahab and David, He did so with one eye on Calvary. And everything sacrificed and

every bleeding lamb, and every smoking altar pointed to a coming day when the spotless lamb would die on Calvary's cross. When God extends forgiveness to the sinner, there is nothing simple, or superficial or cheap about that forgiveness. It's the most costly thing in the world. It cost God the life's blood of His own Son.

So that when God forgave the Old Testament patriarchs, He did so with one eye on Calvary, knowing full well that the day would come when Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God would offer His own heart and soul as an offering for sin. David sinned, you remember, a grievous sin, and then he was convicted of his sin. And in the throes of his conviction, he sat down and wrote a prayer in which he confesses his sin and he says, "Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. Cast me not away from Thy presence," and God heard his prayer. After having been heard and forgiven, he sat down and wrote another psalm, saying, "Blessed is the man whose transgression is forgiven and whose sin is covered." How could God forgive his sin and cover his transgression? How? He could only do it because He knew the day would come when David's greater Son would come into the world and He would go to the cross, and He would cry out in the anguish of His soul, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" God did not forsake David precisely because He did forsake Jesus Christ upon the cross. And when Jesus cried out in the agony of soul, "My God, My God..." He meant exactly what He said. He was forsaken by God. And in those three hours of darkness as He hung upon that cross, His heavenly Father, in whose bosom He had been from all eternity, turned His back and hid His face from His own Son. And in some strange way that nobody, nobody will ever fully understand, His holy soul was made an offering for sin. He, the sinless one, in the words of Paul was made sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. He could forgive David because He had to punish Jesus, so when the time came, God took Noah's sin, Abraham's sin, and Moses' sin,--yea, He took the sin of the whole world and He caused that sin to strike on the head of Jesus Christ, and He extracted from His only begotten and well-beloved Son the last farthing of the debt that we had incurred. By so doing, He declares to a moral universe that there is nothing cheap about His forgiveness. He is just as righteous as He ever claimed to be and it is still true that the soul that sinneth, it shall die. When Jesus died, He died the death of a SINNER for the wrath of God upon sin was upon Jesus Christ when He died in your place and mine. In order to what—not only to fulfill God's eternal plan and purpose, not only to manifest the love of God which He did, but to vindicate the holiness of God, and to uphold the law of God, and to declare for all the universe to see and know, that God is righteous. "In the cross of Christ I see how God can save, yet righteous be." Shall we pray!