

## *712 What Does the Cross Say to Us?*

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### *God's Answers to Life's Questions*

Today we're asking the question, "What was Jesus saying to us with the cross?" Imagine with me these powerful scenes: Jesus is praying at Gethsemane for the cup to pass from Him, but is willing to do His Father's will, all the while knowing what is ahead. So intense was his praying sweat as if drops of blood flowed from his brow. Jesus could see the crowds with swords and spears coming for him. Judas, his own familiar friend, betrayed him with a kiss. His disciples scattered. They arrested and bound him, taking him away like a criminal. They lied about him and falsely accused him in a series of illegal trials. One of his closest disciples denied him three times, once in his presence. They slapped him, mocked him, spit upon him. In the end they condemned him for blasphemy. They stood him before a crowd in the Praetorian and call out for his crucifixion, while they let a guilty man go free. The people who earlier praised him as their Messiah now denied him as their king. The Gentile soldiers mocked him, scourged him, and beat him again and again. They forced him to carry the very cross of his destruction through the streets to shame him. When he could hardly go further, they forced a stranger to help him. Carrying that cross up to Golgotha, in the presence of all, they stripped him of his clothes. Imagine how they took large nails and drove it through his hands and feet. They suspended him between heaven and earth on the nails, left to die. Imagine being mercilessly mocked and spurned, despised and rejected, while he hung there in utter anguish. Imagine the sins of the world laid upon him. Imagine the sun being darkened, an earthquake shaking the foundations. Imagine his being so alone, so cursed, so burdened that he cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

What was Jesus trying to get across to us when He died upon the cross? I cannot imagine his being willing to take the punishment he took without trying to relay some message to us. There may be other things he is saying, but here are three that really matter. First, "**I love you.**" If anyone ever doubts the love of God, all he needs to do is look long and hard at the cross. The apostle John said in 1 John 4:8-10, "Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." We have all seen small measures of love in our lives; people were good to us and blessed us. Yet, I wonder if any love we have ever seen could measure up to what Jesus did for us. We know the meaning of love by looking at the cross. No one could be more eloquent, more determined, more willing to sacrifice, more moving with their love than Jesus. When Jesus says "I love you," no one can doubt it.

Once in a while I run across a person who says to me, Phil, I don't feel very loved by God. These folks somehow feel forgotten or neglected. When I hear someone say that, I recall in my mind the words of Isaiah. Isaiah 49:14-16 says: But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me." To which the Lord answers: "Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands." God has forgotten you, if you are one of His. You are engraved on his hands. You are not a passing fad or an acquaintance or a stranger; you are his beloved child. If you are His child, God

cares about you the way any good father would care for his child. You are always on His mind. But God loves more than men are capable of loving. Jesus said in Matthew 7:9-11, "Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup>Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? <sup>11</sup>If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" God is better than the best of fathers. He really cares for each of us.

Well, the love of God implies something important. It implies that you are loveable. Some people regard themselves as unlovable, but Jesus sees things in us that we don't often see in ourselves. People didn't want to be around the tax-collector Zacchaeus, but Jesus went to his house. People were unafraid and avoided lepers, but Jesus touched them. The prodigal son was fearful and ashamed: "I am not worthy to be called your son"; but the father (who is God) said, "This my son..." It is a slam on God to say that we are worthless in His eyes—He loves us. We may be sinful, but God loved us anyway. Sin makes a person feel small in his own eyes. But God sees not only what we are but also what we can become. He gives us hope. Paul said in Titus 3:3-5, "For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit." God loved us even in our sins. He did not save us because we were so valuable. He saved us when we were messed and made valuable people out of us. He knew what we could become. He took us as diamonds in the rough and made us shine as lights to the world.

Second, Jesus is saying through the cross, "**I want to forgive you**" (and I'll pay the price to do so). God is in the saving business, and Jesus went to the cross to save us from the sinful world around us. Paul said in Galatians 1:4 that Jesus "gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father." God could not look down at this sinful world and do nothing. He wanted to make a profound difference in the direction of the world. He wanted to find a way for men to come out of sin and live righteous and good lives. By means of the cross, God made a way to save us from sin and to change our lives. Our salvation is personal to Jesus. It's not a passing fashion; it is what he was willing to live and die for. Peter said in 1 Peter 2:24, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. Jesus would not have been willing to sacrifice his body, if our salvation was not important. The Hebrew writer in Hebrews 9:22 said that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." Jesus couldn't bring about our forgiveness any other way than shedding his blood on the cross. Jesus said in John 10:18, "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father." Jesus out of love took the initiative to die for your sins so that you could be forgiven and live a new life.

Well..., the forgiveness of God implies something; it implies that you are forgiveable. Nothing you've ever done, nothing you're doing now, nothing you'll ever do will keep God from forgiving you, if you will repent and confess it. You may say to yourself, "I'm such a sinner that God could never forgive me"; but sinners are the only kind of people God saves. Jesus told a meaningful parable in Luke 18:9-14. He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other." No matter how far you have wandered away, God will always let you come home. When Jonah preached to that ungodly city Nineveh, they repented; and God relented. God does have a criteria for those Christians whom he forgives—repentance and confession. David said in Psalm 51:17, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." And again in Psalm 34:18, "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit." God won't despise you, if you come to Him humbly and penitently.

The third thing Jesus says with the cross is "**I have a cross for you.**" Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, "For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised." Jesus died for you to free you from sin so that you could make a difference for others. In Mark 8:34-38 he says that Jesus summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels." Jesus wants us to follow Him, and that means we too must carry our cross. We must die to ourselves and live for Him. The old song says, "Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free? No there's a cross for everyone, and there's a cross for me." Paul by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit said in Galatians 6:14, "But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."

The cross was meant for the suffering of Jesus, but for every Christian it is also a symbol of love and salvation. We carry to say to the world that we have stopped living the way the world lives and begun living like Christ. Paul again says in Galatians 5:24, "Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." The heart of a Christian longs to love the Lord and serve Him and Him alone.

Now, carrying our cross implies something else; it implies that Christ has a work for us. Some folks think they have little use in the church, little ability; but every member of the church has a value in God's eyes. But God values every person and has a ministry for every person. Paul uses the phrase in 2 Corinthians 6:1, "working together with Him." We are God's partners to make a better world. He says in 1 Corinthians 3:9, "we are God's fellow-workers." My friend, how are you using your life for the Lord? How are you serving? If you will carry your cross, God will use you to make a difference in this world. Jesus invites us in Matthew 11:28-30, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." God needs your help to rescue a lost and dying world. Will you help or hinder? God can take weak and insignificant people and make them into the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Will you take up a cross and follow Him?

Imagine the heart of Jesus on the cross, giving everything to you and me. He has come to earth to sacrifice his body and his blood to make sure that you know he loves you and wants you to be saved. Don't you think that while he was on the cross, Jesus was hoping and praying people would notice and respond? What more could Jesus have done to convince us of His love, His offering of forgiveness, and of a wonderful life of service? His sacrifice ought to touch our hearts deeply. Now, how would Jesus feel, if the people He loved and wanted so badly to come to Him and be saved instead simply ignored and forgot Him? Can you imagine anything more cruel than the way people ignore the cross of Christ today? Can you think of anything more ungrateful than the way our society tells the Lord to hush about sin? Now, how would Jesus feel about people who took great notice and changed their lives and took up their crosses to follow Him? My friend, what does Jesus think about you? Is He happy or hurt about the way you have responded to Him?

Take a long, close look at the cross and let it touch your heart. If you wish to become a Christian, believe in the Lord Jesus with all your heart, repent of your sins, confess the name of Christ before others, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Today is the best day to make a difference in the rest of your life. Don't put off obeying the gospel; take up your cross today.

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