

Sonoraville Baptist Church
Sunday, March 14, 2010 – 11:00 AM
Rev. Steve Skates, Pastor

The Old Rugged Cross – Philippians 3:7-11

Introduction: In 1913 George Bennard, a Methodist evangelist, was struggling with a problem that caused him a great deal of anxiety and pain. As he studied on Philippians 3:10, where Paul talked about wanting to know Christ and the “*fellowship of his sufferings*” and “*becoming like him in his death,*” he knew that this cross where Christ suffered was not a pretty sight, but was a rough, splintery and bloody method of execution. But it was through this experience, he got the theme for a hymn that has become a favorite for many: *The Old Rugged Cross*.

As Bennard began to study about the cross, in his own words he began “*praying for a full understanding of the cross and its plan in Christianity.*” One day, as he was meditating on the cross, and reading his Bible, he was able to say, “*I saw the Christ of the cross as if I were seeing John 3:16 leave the printed page, take form and act out the meaning of redemption.*”

Well, one day, Bennard sat down and wrote a tune, but in the next few weeks, the only words that would come were “*I’ll cherish the old rugged cross.*”

As Bennard continued to focus on the cross, it became even more urgent to him to finish the hymn. So, again, as he was conducting a revival service in Albion, Michigan, he sat down and this time the words came. He said, “*I...immediately was able to rewrite the stanzas of the song without so much as one word failing to fall into place. I called my wife, took out my guitar, and sang the completed song to her. She was thrilled.*”

On June 7, 1913 George Bennard introduced the new hymn in a revival meeting he was conducting in Pokagon, Michigan. And since that time, “*The Old Rugged Cross*” has become one of the top ten most popular hymns of the 20th century.

This morning, let’s take this passage from Philippians along with the words of this hymn to help us understand the meaning of the cross. First, let’s see the old rugged cross as:

1. The Heart of History - “*On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross.*”

The cross of Jesus is the central point of all of history. The death and resurrection of Christ is the most earth-shattering and life-changing event in all of history, but the crucifixion is the single event for which all of time was created.

From the very foundation of the world God knew the cross of Christ would be the heart and focal point of human history. Even as He created man perfectly in His own image, He knew that one day, sin would rear its ugly head and man would fall for it and grab it, hook, line and sinker. And in man’s fall from divinity to depravity, God knew that man would need a Savior to come and rescue Him from his own rebellion and destruction.

So preceding man’s creation, God created something called time. Now time had never existed before. The Bible teaches us that there is no day and night in heaven because the Son of God always shines in heaven. So God created time when He created day and night and it was all for the purpose of one day, when the time was right, of sending His Son to this earth to die on that cross for you and me. And that is why all life on earth revolves around that old rugged cross. It was and is the heart of history for mankind.

The Apostle Paul believed that because in our passage, he talks about what that cross represented to him and how he could relate to Christ’s suffering. He discusses a belief that is still prevalent even today - that somehow man can reconcile himself to God on his own and earn his way into heaven. He writes in vs. 7, “*But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.*”

What things were to his profit? Well, for one, he had the credentials that would position him head and shoulders above most of his peers. He says in the verses 5-6 that he had been “*circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.*” **Philippians 3:5-6 (NIV)**. All of these things at one time in his life, he counted them as his treasures. He says that in these things, he placed his trust. He felt these things would guarantee him a place in heaven, but now, he considered them as worthless trash.

Ever since Paul encountered the crucified and resurrected Christ, all that counted to him was the righteousness given to him by the sacrifice of Jesus on that cross.

The cross became Paul's focal point, and today, if you are trusting in anything else to get you into heaven, you need to do as Paul did and see those things as worthless as far as your salvation is concerned. All the credentials you have may lead you to a profitable life on earth, but in eternity, where will they lead you? Only the cross of Christ can lead you to eternal life, so today, I urge you to start making your way to that hill far away where the cross of Jesus stands. Next, let's see the old rugged cross as:

2. The Sign of Suffering – *“the emblem of suffering and shame”*

Crucifixion originated in Persia. They believed the earth to be sacred, so they raised their condemned criminals above the earth in order to not defile it. The victim was suspended on a large pole and left there to die. This practice was picked up by the Carthaginians, and later by the Romans. By the time of Christ, crucifixion had become the favored method of execution throughout the Roman Empire. In fact, by this time, Rome had executed some 30,000 victims by crucifixion in Israel alone, so crosses were a common site in Jerusalem.

However, as common as the sight of a crucifixion might have been, there was nothing common about the brutality and horror and the suffering of those who hung on a cross. Let me read you a description of crucifixion written by Fredrick Farrar in his book, *“The Life of Christ.”*

“A death by crucifixion seems to include all that pain and death can have of the horrible and ghastly – dizziness, cramp, thirst, starvation, sleeplessness, traumatic fever, shame, mortification of intended wounds – all intensified just up to the point at which they can be endured at all, but all stopping just short of the point which would give the sufferer the relief of unconsciousness.

The unnatural position made every movement painful; the lacerated veins and crushed tendons throbbed with incessant anguish; the wounds, inflamed by exposure, gradually gangrened...; the arteries...became swollen and oppressed with surcharged blood; and while each variety of misery went on gradually increasing, there was added to them the intolerable pang of burning and raging thirst, and all these physical complications caused an internal excitement and anxiety, which made the prospect of death itself...bear the aspect of a delicious and exquisite release.

One thing is clear. The first century executions were not like the modern ones, for they did not seek a quick, painless death nor the preservation of any measure of dignity for the criminal. On the contrary, they sought an agonizing torture which completely humiliated him.” (Copied from MacArthur's New Testament Commentary, Matthew 24-28, pg. 255).

The cross was indeed *“an emblem of suffering and shame.”* Do you see it? Can you imagine Jesus going through all of that for you? Can you say as Paul did, *“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death?”* (10).

Finally, I want us to see the old rugged cross as:

3. The Love of Our Life - *“I love that old cross where the dearest and best for a world of lost sinners was slain.”*

As George Bennard pondered and studied the cross, he began to see its meaning in God's plan of redemption. I'm sure he thought back to his own life before he met Christ, and how miserable it was. He was reminded of his own sin and how that sin along with every other sin that had ever been committed was heaped upon the sinless one as Jesus hung on the cross. He began to see the cross as the place where God gave His best for the world's worst. And in unashamed and unbridled affection, he proclaimed, *“I love that old cross!”*

You know, until you see yourself as a lost and dying sinner, headed for an eternity in hell without Christ, you'll never say, *“I love that old cross.”* Now you might say, *“I love myself,”* or *“I love my career,”* or *“I love my house, my car, my lifestyle. But loving a cross? How is that possible?”*

You know, we need to be careful when it comes to what we call important and what we say we love in this life. For how important will these things be when the Dr. comes out and says, *“You've got cancer?”* How important will they be when you round that curve and meet a car driven by a drunk driver, and he's on your side of the road?

The Apostle Paul loved his life before he met Christ. Before he met the risen Lord, he was on his way to Damascus to round up more Christians to persecute. He thought that was an important thing to do and that he was racking up the points with God, and earning him a prominent place in the religious establishment.

But what Paul was really doing was trying to get himself into heaven on his own merit. He thought his achievements and accomplishments were earning him favor with God, but all they were doing was clouding his thinking about who he really was – a lost sinner in need of a Savior. They were getting in the way of having a relationship with Christ.

But when Paul met Jesus that day on the Damascus road, and Jesus told Paul that he was really persecuting Him, Paul's eyes were opened to the truth. He saw himself as a lost and misguided sinner who was headed in the wrong direction, and needed to turn around. And from that point on, Paul fell in love with Jesus. So much so, that he considered everything he had accomplished in his life "*a loss*" when "*compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus Christ*" as his "*Lord*."

Your relationship with Christ is more important than anything else you may have, love, be, or do. It's more important than your church membership, or how long you taught Sunday School, or how long you've been a deacon, or even how many Bible verses you've memorized.

Deciding to have a relationship with Christ is the most important decision you'll ever make. It's more important than choosing a college, or choosing your spouse, or deciding to have kids. To know Christ is the greatest decision you'll ever make, and placing anything or anyone above your relationship with Christ is having your love and your priorities in the wrong order.

Conclusion: I close with a story about a little girl who went with her mom to the jewelry store one day. As her mom was looking at the earrings and necklaces, the little girl spotted a beautiful shiny gold cross on a chain in the display case. She went to her mom and said, "*Mommy, can I have that cross? It would look pretty around my neck.*" Her mom, trying to talk her out of it, said, "*Honey, you know the cross Jesus died on wasn't beautiful and shiny like that one. It was an ugly, wooden horrible looking thing.*" To which the girl replied, "*Yes, I know. But they told me in Sunday school that whatever Jesus touches, He changes.*"

The old rugged cross was not a pretty sight as our Savior hung there dying. And today, many people despise the cross and turn away from it because they don't see any beauty in it. Even some churches have removed any references to an old rugged and bloody cross from their hymnbooks.

But this morning, I invite you to see the cross for its wondrous beauty for Jesus' death has transformed that old rugged cross into something that can now be cherished. And because He did, He can also change your life of misery and confusion into a life of hope and peace.

I invite you to encounter the risen Lord today and allow Him to open your eyes to the cross as not only the Heart of History; as not only a Sign of Suffering, but more importantly, I invite you to see the cross and let it become the Love of your Life, because it is the place where God gave His very best for you.