

## THE TAMING OF THE CROSS

Sermon preached before the Southern Baptist Convention, Miami, Florida, by Dr. Monroe F. Swilley, Jr., Atlanta, Georgia, May 1955)

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:10-25

Text: "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel; and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power" (1 Cor. 1:17, RSV)

About one hundred years ago Heinrich Heine, the German intellectual, made a cynical observation concerning the role of the cross in the life of his people. He said, "The day will come when it will pitifully collapse. The old stone gods will rise from the forgotten rubble and rub the dust of a thousand years from their eyes, and Thor will leap up and with his giant hammers start smashing the Gothic cathedrals." This astute observer realized full well what the influence of German rationalism was doing to the heart of the Christian gospel. Adolph Hitler did rise, and with the hammer of Thor in his hands he endeavored to destroy the last vestige of Christian influence in his land and in the world. The ugly, hydra-headed monster of racism, atheism, materialism, totalitarianism, militarism, and imperialism rushed forward to devour the ripest fruits of western civilization. This could never have happened in a so-called Christian nation without the taming of the cross, that ancient and historic symbol of God's miracle-working power. Throughout the Christian era the living cross has been able to thwart and defeat every sinister purpose which was set in motion by the malignant powers of evil.

The free world today is engaged in a continuing phase of that struggle. Whether the war is "hot" or "cold," the issues are still the same. Make no mistake about it, the forces of godless Communism are determined to exercise their dominion over all mankind. Already, eight hundred million people, occupying approximately one half of

the land mass of the earth, live under the red flag. The champions of this philosophy are demonstrating a fanatical and frenzied zeal for their program of blood, hatred, and aggression.

Do Christians today have moral and spiritual strength that is equivalent to this godless force? When we look into the faces of our children and grandchildren, do we have the assurance that they will live in a world without fear? It is easy to feel that what we do is without significance. In every battle for truth, justice, and freedom, what one person does can often determine the outcome.

The easy-going optimist is quick to point out the evidence of a spiritual renaissance in our land. Over ninety million Americans are now members of some church. The greatest movies, finest TV programs, and best-seller books deal with religious themes. The President of the United States gives a positive and courageous witness to his Christian faith. A group of congressmen meet each day in a prayer room in Washington. Christian personalities, like Bishop Sheen, Norman Vincent Peale, and Billy Graham, attract large and responsive audiences. Many Hollywood movie stars are showing signs of spiritual awareness. For this rise in the spiritual thermometer, we offer our heartfelt gratitude to God.

The long hard look is somewhat sobering. Someone has well pointed out that thermometers merely register the temperature of the surrounding atmosphere, while a thermostat controls it. Christian motivation in our hearts should produce a moral climate which is conducive to the development of strong, vigorous, and dynamic personalities. The immorality, crimes of violence, robbery, corruption and graft in high and low places, and the cost of preparations for war are appalling and shattering. Even in the house of God we need to ask the question, what discernible difference is the fact of my

Christian profession making in the way I live? It is searching and revealing sometimes to ask, would there be any difference in the way I think and act if Jesus Christ had never lived on this earth?

Listen to Billy Graham, "We believe a religious revival is the only hope of the world, but very few of us are willing to start in our own lives, and pay the price. There is a lot of watered-down, namby-pamby peace of mind sort of business which is of little religious value."

Dr. Paul Calvin Payne, chairman of the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches, <sup>criticizes</sup> ~~excites~~ the soft, religious sentiments of many modern Christians and reminds us that Christianity requires "heroic commitment to great causes and ideas."

Many years before the revolution in Russia, a village priest was greatly concerned about the preoccupation and indifference of his people. One night he climbed to the roof of his church and nailed a transverse beam across the diagonal section of the beautiful cross which adorned the steeple. The next Sunday the angry people demanded that the beam be removed. The man of God was adamant and said, "You have canceled the cross in your daily lives. When you restore the cross to its rightful place in your hearts, then I'll remove the beam from the steeple." Canceled crosses in the hearts of Christians will not command the fascination or devotion of a lost world.

The cross in our day has become a charm, an amulet, an adornment. We have exercised ingenious artistry in our efforts to domesticate it and to subdue its vital and soul-stirring passion. The most thrilling, exciting, impelling, and gripping symbol of all time has become a dull, languid, insipid, and inert commonplace. The original cross was rough, rugged, and unsightly. It was drenched with tears, stained with blood, and pierced with nails. Our crosses arouse a passing admiration, while

the original cross of Jesus redeemed a dying thief, and flung open the doors of Paradise, not only for him but for all who will believe.

## I. THE NATURE OF SIN

When our original parents disobeyed God, they were unwilling to face the consequences of their actions. The call of God as he walked in the cool of the Garden went unheeded. Bearing upon their souls the intolerable burden of guilt, they feared to face the one who, alone, could bring pardon and renewal of fellowship. They blazed a trail of evasion and subterfuge over which men still walk today.

Not long ago a lad disobeyed his mother. He hid himself behind the shrubbery surrounding the house. Though the afternoon and into the night his mother called his name with no response. Finally he tried the back door and found it open. Slipping into the house, he made his way upstairs to his bedroom and, under cover of darkness, prepared for bed. Even the ~~darkness~~ <sup>darkness</sup> became his enemy and drove sleep from his eyes. Through the moonlight he became aware of his mother sitting by his bed. With a sob he threw himself into her arms. Comforting his aching heart as only a mother can, she said, "Why didn't you answer when I called? Didn't you know we could work this thing out together?"

The cross on which Jesus died reveals sin as something with which only God can adequately deal. Man constantly evades this sublime truth and tries to find the answer within himself. It is the distortion of the glory of the cross which has brought untold suffering to mankind. No system of penance, no elaboration of ritual, no program of reformation has ever been devised which can deliver the soul of man from bondage of evil. This is a problem which only God can solve.

## II. THE MINISTRY OF PAIN

Nowhere has our effort to soften and enervate the cross become more apparent than in our attitude toward pain. The question arises so

often when misfortune, disease, or death visits our lives, why did this have to happen to me? The assumption seems to be that being a Christian calls for exemption from the heartaches and miseries which are the common lot of mankind. The arrival of suffering or sorrow is considered a hostile intrusion into our plans, and a vicious disturbance of the neat harmonies of our lives. Racked with pain, consumed with fever, plagued with disease, and tortured in soul, millions stand beside life's wailing wall. The cross reaches down into the great deeps and brings an answer, not so much as to "why" but with a triumphant "how."

Long ago one of God's great servants drank from the chalice of pain. The floods of disaster swept away all of life's comfortable securities. A desert storm rolled in with the burning, whirling sands to slay his sons and daughters. A loathsome disease affected his body. Even his wife advised him to "curse God and die" (Job 2:9). Well did Job know that the cursing and the dying would be one. Out of the pits of his despair there comes the ringing affirmation of his faith, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (Job. 13:15). About half a century ago Oscar Wilde remarked that there was enough suffering in one London lane to show that God does not love man. Orphaned in heart, wounded in spirit, frustrated in mind, Wilde tried to ask why; and the only answer was a faint and fragile echo. There is a better answer when we ask the question in a different way. In looking at the cross, we will find enough of an answer to satisfy the heart.

The intensity of the physical suffering of our Lord in connection with the events of Passion Week cannot be measured. The cry of dereliction, "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34), and the cry of physical anguish, "I thirst" (John 19:28), reveal nothing less than the very agony of God. This indicates

the distance ~~of~~ God is willing to go in sharing the sharpest pain, the deepest grief, and the darkest despair with every man. No wonder a boy in a hospital about to go into the operating room said to his father, "I'm not afraid of anything as long as you are here."

In one of Ibsen's plays the question is asked, "Who taught thee to sing?" The singer answered, "God sent me sorrow." Suffering is not an intruder, an interloper, and unfriendly guest, but rather it is a wise teacher of great and inexpressible things.

Dr. Hutton, in the British Weekly, tells of the caddies on the golf course at St. Andrew's. He says that these youngsters are more or less dictators in their own spheres. The caddy will give careful advice about the club, the direction, and the distance; and then stand quietly by to see what you can do. One one occasion a stranger was playing the course, and not being accustomed to such expert advice from his caddy, was somewhat disturbed by it. Finally they came to a dog-leg hole which could be reached only by a circuitous route. The caddy handed him a club and said, "You play on that black-roofed building over there on the left." "Would it not be better," said the strange, "to go straight for the hole?" To which the caddy replied, "You may play in any direction you wish; I was only suggesting how to play in order to win the hole." We have our instructions in the cross. We can ~~pass~~ spend our time trying to soften the cross with our relentless "whys" or we can discover God's "how" in the manner of our Saviour. "We are more than conquerors through him that loved us" (Rom. 8:37).

### III. THE UTTERNESS OF LOVE

Perhaps we can blame the English language for our failure to understand and keep alive the grand passion of divine love in the drama of the cross. Unfortunately, the English word "love" must cover several different meanings. It could mean anything from the romantic feeling

of a boy for his sweetheart to the holy love between man and God. In spreading the word over this multiplicity of meanings, it has lost much of its color, freshness, richness, and power.

The Greek language is much richer. There are four words for love that are most often used, Epithumia denotes affection that is purely sensuous. Philia is used for the love of two friends. Agape is the constantly recurring word in denoting God's love for man and man's love for God. The New Testament writers took this word and invested it with a meaning that carried all that God could feel for man and all that man could feel for God. This word moved from earth to heaven and from heaven to earth. Here was a love that was more than sexual, brotherly, or patriotic. This love became a sacred passion which stirred the mind, warmed the heart, and aroused the will. There was an utterness in his love that impelled men to hazard their lives for the gospel.

Men have wondered what kept John Wesley in the saddle for fifty-three years. He was still traveling and preaching at eighty-eight. They have wondered what kept David Livingston in the jungles of Africa for thirty-three years, and William Carey in India until God called him home.

The cross reveals the love of God for each man at the point of his deepest need. Gerald Kennedy in his book, "Who Speaks for God?" tells about a famous colony of mercy in a place called Bethel in Westphalia, Germany. It is dedicated to the care of epileptics and the mentally deficient. It is in some ways a horrible place to visit. Perhaps the most pitiful part is the ward for babies and young children. Some years ago a wealthy man was being shown about in the hope that he would help support this colony, which depends upon gifts from interested patrons. He finally came into the children's section where he was so



moved he could not speak. After he had recovered himself, he asked how many of the children would be helped enough so that they could live normal lives. About one in a hundred was the reply. "Oh," the visitor said impatiently, "the it isn't worth it." The superintendent replied, "Suppose that one were your son." It is only in the cross that a man finds a great shy of love over his life.

Catherine Marshall, in the story of her husband's life, "A Man Called Peter," describes the night on which Peter was taken with his last illness. When the heart attack seized him an ambulance was called to remove him to the hospital. As he was being carried out the front door on the stretcher, he looked up into Catherine's face and said, "Darling, I'll see you in the morning." This was a radiant expression of a faith in a love that always stands within the shadow, keeping watch above its own.

#### IV. THE DIMENSIONS OF VICTORY

Many Christians today have weakened the power of the cross by confining it to mere human categories of thought. Like the Disciples, we look on the dark side and allow a sense of failure and futility to black out the shining stars of victory. In one of our churches there is a beautiful stained glass window. On dark, dismal, and dreary days its colors are subdued and conquered. One must look at this window when the sun is high in the sky in order to see its transcendent glory. Then all the richness of color and brilliance of tone leap forth to enthrall us. The cross is not a dark symbol of defeat, but the divine sign and assertion of the triumph of humility and service in a world of pride, arrogance, and selfishness. Against a background of suffering and death, we can see the everlasting message of God's measure of greatness.

You cannot bless until you bleed: you cannot save until you serve; you cannot lift until you stoop. While Christ shed his blood, God



held the world closer to his heart than at any other time in human history. A man is never bigger than when he puts the strength of his life under the load that another carries.

#### CONCLUSION

How big is the cross in your life? Is it weak and inane, drab and powerless? Have you robbed it of its ancient power? Have you left it outside a city wall where our Lord was crucified two thousand years ago, or does it live in your heart today? The cross for the first century must become the cross of the twentieth century. The cross planed once in Palestine must be planted again in America.

A native of Switzerland lived in the valley but spent his days climbing the difficult mountain peaks. One day he attempted to climb the sheerest side of the highest mountain near his home. It was necessary to scale a perpendicular granite cliff some hundred feet high. He sought to do so by pulling himself along a rope, hand over hand. Just as he was about to throw his foot over the upper ledge the rope broke, cut by the rocks to which it was looped. Dashed to death by the fall, he was found at the base of the cliff. Since his friends knew he loved the mountains so, they decided to bury him where he fell, and on the monument that marked his resting place were carved these words, "He died--climbing."