

## “THE OLD RUGGED CROSS”

Of all the mementos of Christ's passion, surely the most familiar and the most cherished is the Old Rugged Cross. The cross of Christ is the very symbol of Christianity. The cross of Christ is the primary focus of the Bible—that is, the sacrifice of God's Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to atone for the sins of the world.

And the cross of Christ is to be the sum and substance of all Christian preaching; as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:23-24, **“But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”** Or as Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 2:2, **“For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”**

As Christians, we not only proclaim the cross, we display the cross: in our homes and churches; on necklaces, bracelets, and lapels; on Bibles, hymnals, banners, vestments, altars, steeples, church signs, and in some instances, even on communion wafers.

And we sing about the cross, too; loudly, lovingly, gratefully: “Sweet the moments rich in blessing, which before the cross we spend,” LH:155. “When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died,” LH 175. “This the superscription be: ‘Jesus crucified for me,’ ” LH:179. “Lift high the cross; the love of Christ proclaim,” WS:769. And, of course, the old Gospel hymn: “On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame.”

However, imagine calling the cross “wondrous” or “rich

in blessing” before the Savior’s crucifixion gave the cross an entirely new meaning. No death was more gruesome, no symbol more feared and dreaded, than that of the Old Rugged Cross. The mere shadow of a cross brought terror.

While the Romans did not invent crucifixion—in fact, the Persians were using crucifixion in the Sixth Century B.C.; and after the Persians, the Greeks; and after the Greeks, the Phoenicians—nevertheless, the Romans certainly perfected this form of execution by making it less costly and more painful; and in the process giving us the happy Latin word *excruciat*, the source of our English word *excruciating* and literally meaning “the pain of the cross”.

The Romans were skilled at crucifixion because they crucified so many people. For example, in 71 B.C. the Romans defeated an army of slaves led by the gladiator Spartacus. As a punishment and a deterrent to other conspirators, the Romans crucified 6,000 slaves over a distance of one hundred and twenty miles along the Appian Way; an average of fifty crosses per mile.

Likewise, during the siege of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the Roman general Titus crucified five hundred Jews daily—in plain view of the city walls, where others Jews, still trapped and starving inside Jerusalem, could hear the screams of the crucified. The crucifixions only stopped when Titus ran out of trees for crosses.

So then, given the cruel history of crucifixion, how can we cherish the Old Rugged Cross? The answer is this: Because Jesus Christ willingly died on that cross to save us from our sins. The cross did not change Jesus. Jesus changed the cross. Through the Savior’s atoning death, the cross itself has become a symbol of many biblical truths. What truths?

**First, the Old Rugged Cross reveals the truth of our sin.** Yes, Jesus died on the cross, but for whose sins—ours, not His. Jesus was and is the holy, sinless Son of God; the true, spotless, unblemished Lamb of God merely pictured in the Old Testament Law and through countless Passover sacrifices. Paul wrote of Jesus: **“God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God,”** 2 Corinthians 5:21.

Over the centuries, how many victims did the Romans drag to the cross—drag kicking and flailing, screaming and weeping, professing innocence and cursing crucifiers. Yet, of them all, Jesus Christ alone was truly innocent. The Jewish Sanhedrin knew this. The high priest Caiaphas knew this. The Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, knew this. Yet, Jews and Gentiles alike still crucified the Son of God. And they crucified Him because He allowed them to, without murmur or complaint—He, God the Son, the almighty Creator of the universe and everything in it. And He allowed them to because He came into this world to save sinners by fully atoning for sin.

Was Jesus surprised by the cross or merely a victim of unfortunate circumstances? Of course not. Read Matthew 16:21. **“From that time on Jesus began to explain to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”**

Consequently, when we look at the cross—whether pictured on Golgotha or dangling from a necklace—let us remember that our sins led Jesus to the cross and pounded the nails as surely as did the Roman soldiers. Because for us to see the brightness of God’s grace, we must also see the blackness of human sin. **“And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity**

of us all,” wrote Isaiah. And of this the Old Rugged Cross is the proof.

**Second, the Old Rugged Cross reveals the truth of our forgiveness.** Is there anyone here tonight who has never felt overwhelmed by sin and guilt? Is there anyone here who has never resembled that poor, guilt-ridden tax collector in the temple who, unable to lift his eyes heavenward, simply struck his heaving chest and hurting heart and confessed: “God, be merciful to me, the sinner”?

Past sins. Poor choices. Worthless pursuits. Emotional wounds oozing the blood of regret and remorse. The times we’ve all said, “God, I’ll never do that again”—and then did. Or, “God, I promise to try harder, be kinder, treat my spouse better”—and then didn’t. In reality, one day we may feel fine, have a sanctified bounce in our steps and *Amazing Grace* on our lips. And the very next day, if not the very next hour, we may feel like the worst of sinners. Like a Judas, who betrayed. Like a Simon Peter, who denied. Like a Thomas, who doubted.

Like a David, who said: **“If You, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?”** Only, how did David go on? **“But with You there is forgiveness,”** Psalm 130:3-4. Or like a Paul, who groaned: **“What a wretched man I am. Who will rescue me from this body of death?”** Yet, how did Paul continue? **“Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord,”** Romans 7:24-25.

When you and I feel unforgiven or unforgiveable, where should we go, if not to the Old Rugged Cross. And when standing at that cross, what should we do? By the grace and power of God, in repentance and faith, we should take all those feelings of guilt and make them subject to divine fact; to the infallible, irrevocable IT IS WRITTEN of the word of God. It is written: Jesus Christ **“was delivered over to death for our**

sins and was raised to life for our justification,” Romans 4:25. It is written: “**Therefore, there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus,**” Romans 8:1. It is written, In Christ “**we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins,**” Ephesians 1:7. It is written: “**And the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin,**” 1 John 1:7. In Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. FORGIVEN. And of this the Old Rugged Cross is the proof. And if God forgives you for the sake of Christ, for the sake of Christ forgive yourself.

**Third, the Old Rugged Cross reveals the truth of God’s great love for us.** Friends, it’s relatively easy to say “God loves me” when times are good and skies are blue and stomachs are full and bills are paid and relationships are happy and medical tests are routine.

Yet, what if times are bad? What if fierce storms are brewing on the horizon? What if bill collectors are calling and relationships are failing and medical reports state DIABETES or CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE or MALIGNANT TUMOR? What then? Do these difficult circumstances indicate that God has stopped loving us; or at the least, that His love for us has diminished? No. And the cross of Jesus Christ is the proof.

God’s love is not feeble, fickle, unreliable, or indeterminable. He loves us in the good times and loves us just as much during the bad times; in health *and* sickness, in wealth *and* poverty, amid blue skies *and* foul weather.

And the clear, undeniable evidence of God’s infinite, unchanging love for us lies in the cross of Jesus Christ. “Well, I don’t think God loves me,” you say. Really? Look at that Old Rugged Cross and the Savior who willingly suffered, bled, and died there for your sins, and then tell me God doesn’t love

you—that God doesn’t love you with His every thought and whole being. Jesus Christ died for you.

And this is precisely why the Bible repeatedly links God’s great love to God’s great sacrifice. The two are inextricably connected. God’s love resulted in God’s sacrifice. God’s sacrifice forever proves God’s love. John 3:16, **“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son.”** Or Romans 5:8, **“But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”** Or Ephesians 2:4-5, **“But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions and sins—it is by grace you have been saved.”** Or 1 John 3:16, **“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us.”**

When my son Andrew was a kindergartener—I can still see him with crumpled artwork in one hand and a Power Rangers lunchbox in the other—he would often run to me, leap into my arms, kiss my cheek, and ask, “Daddy, wanna know how much I love you?” He’d stretch his little arms as wide as they would go and say, “This much.”

I sometimes think of Jesus in this way; His arms stretched wide open, with His wrists nailed to the cross. “Would you like to know how much I love you?” He asks, and then answers: “This much.” It’s the reality of what Jesus Christ did on the cross at Calvary that led Paul to write this about the unchanging reality of God’s love: **“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord,”** Romans 8:38-39. And of this the Old Rugged Cross is the proof.

**Fourth, the Old Rugged Cross reveals the truth of God's ongoing provision for us.** How so? Allow me to pose a simple question: If God the Father sacrificed His Only Begotten Son for you; if He gave you the very best that He had to give, do you really think that He will withhold and other godly blessing from your life—a pair of shoes, a change of clothes, a meal to eat, a place to shelter?

Do we begin to understand why Paul's message was always about Christ crucified? Paul saw Christ and His cross as the answer for everything from eternal life to daily bread. And on the basis of Christ's sacrifice, He wrote this: **"If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?"** Romans 8:31-32. And of this the Old Rugged Cross is the proof.

**Fifth, the Old Rugged Cross reveals the truth of our worth to God.** Have you ever felt worthless, useless, unwanted? I have too. The feeling is dreadful, and often the result of ongoing rejection or a wrong view of self based on the misguided opinions of others. But I say: Who cares what others think? I care about what God thinks. My worth comes from Him, not myself, not my peers, not my society, and certainly not the latest issue of Cosmopolitan magazine.

If the value of something is determined by what we are willing to pay in order to have it, then of what enormous worth we must be to God. Consider the price He paid to redeem us from our sins and have us as His own. And so Peter wrote: **"For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect,"** 1 Peter 1:18-19.

What if we began and ended each day, thinking, “I am of great worth to God. He willingly died on the cross to cleanse me from all my sins; to have me as His own for all time and eternity. I am His. He is mine.” What would such an attitude do for our lives, marriages, ministries, homes, children, friendships, careers? Folks, this is not wishful thinking. It is the reality. You are of incalculable worth to God. And of this the Old Rugged Cross is the proof.

**Finally, the Old Rugged Cross reveals the truth of our call to change**, and the power and motivation God gives us through the cross of Christ to willingly make godly changes. Surely, this needs no explanation. How can we stand beneath the Old Rugged Cross and not be changed? How can we witness Christ bleeding and dying for our sakes, and insist we can go our way and God can go His?

No. It’s in the cross of Jesus that we find the strength and willingness to live as Christ lived, love as Christ loved, serve as Christ served, and forgive as Christ forgave. Paul wrote in Galatians 2:20, **“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”** And of this the Old Rugged cross is the proof.