

## The Measure of the Cross

*So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*

Ephesians 3:17-19

Over in Europe a number of years ago, there was a man who had been condemned for a terrible crime. When the sentence was pronounced, he was placed in an underground dungeon cell. His tongue was cut out. He was placed in solitary confinement and even the entrance way to the cell was sealed off with bricks and mortar so there could never again be any contact with the outside world. A small opening was left at the bottom of the entrance way where a tray of food could be passed underneath once each day, so that the prisoner could be fed. Except for the sound of the guards coming down the hallway each day to bring his tray of food, he heard nothing from the outside world. He spent the rest of his life in that very miserable way.

One day, when the guards came down with the food, they found that the tray of food that they had left the day before was

untouched. They reported it, but the officials did nothing. Again, the next day when they returned, no food had been eaten and again it was reported and nothing was done. The third day, when the guards came with the food and still their prisoner had not eaten, it was reported and the officials decided that they would break in and find out what had happened to their prisoner. They brought down heavy sledge hammers and broke away the bricks and mortar that had sealed the entrance way.

Once they gained entrance to the cell, they found that their prisoner had died. Among his possessions was a Bible on a reading stand and it was open to the third chapter of Ephesians. The guards paid no attention to the Bible, but began rummaging through the prisoner's effects. One of the guards noticed that on the wall the prisoner had drawn a crude picture of the cross of Christ. Up at the top of the cross he had written the word, height, down at the bottom, the word depth, on the left hand arm of the cross, he had written, breadth, and on the right hand arm of the cross the word, length.

The guards began to talk among themselves as to the possible meaning of that picture and why the prisoner had labeled the four extremities of the cross in that way. They couldn't figure it out and then one of them said, "Why don't we read where he has left the Bible open? Maybe we would find the clue someplace there in the scriptures." So, they began to read the third chapter of Ephesians until they came to the 17th and 18th verses and then they began to understand what he had in mind with that picture, when they read, "That Christ may dwell in dwell in your hearts by faith that you be rooted and grounded in love may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge that you might be filled with all the fullness of God."

### **I. The Left Arm**

I want us to trace those four dimensions of the old rugged cross and try to understand what that prisoner had in mind when he wrote those four words at the four extremities of the cross. I'd like

to begin at that left hand arm of the cross, where the prisoner wrote the word breadth. How far back of Calvary does the old rugged cross reach with its power to forgive sin?

### *Back of the Cross*

We know that long before Jesus came people lived on this earth and they were all sinners, because the Bible says, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." We know that the wages of sin is death according to Romans 6:23. What is going to happen to all the people back of the cross, the millions of people who lived on this earth from the time of Adam and Eve right up to the time of Jesus on the cross? Are they all going to have to go to hell simply because they lived before there was a Savior? If that's true, it's contrary to the love of God and the forgiveness of God and the mercy of God. What is the explanation then? What about those who live back of the cross?

### *God Had a Plan*

As we study the sacred scriptures, we find that God has always had a plan for forgiving sinners. Back of the cross, God had a plan. That plan began to be unfolded with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. You remember that Adam and Eve sinned against God in the garden. But even at the time of their sin, God killed the animals and He took the skins of the animals and clothed the naked bodies of Adam and Eve. Then God made a prediction that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the seed of the serpent. While the seed of the serpent would only be able to bruise the heel of the seed of the woman. Genesis 3:15 is the first prophecy of the coming of a Savior to redeem the world from sin. This first prophecy was made at the time when the world's first man and woman had sinned against God.

As we go on in the Old Testament scriptures we come to that

promise found in Genesis 17, God's promise that through the seed of Abraham, a Savior would come and all nations of the world would be blessed. Next we come to the time of Moses, the children of Israel, and the building of the tabernacle with its three altars; the altar on the outside, the altar on the inside, and the altar where the blood was placed once a year. We find that through these blood sacrifices the sins of the people were rolled forward one more year. Notice that the sins were not forgiven; they were rolled forward one more year. The blood sacrifice of animals was placed on the altar. This looked forward to the coming of Jesus, the Lamb of God, who would die upon Calvary's cross shedding His blood once for all.

### *The Plan Revealed in the New Testament*

We see the plan of God unfolded as we turn to Hebrews 10. We read in verses 1-4, "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming — not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." In all the worship and sacrifices and the blood that was shed under the Old Testament dispensation there was no forgiveness. Their sins were merely moved forward one year at a time, but in verses 9-10 it says, "Then he said, 'Here I am, I have come to do your will.' He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all."

### *Back to the Beginning*

How far back of Calvary does the old rugged cross reach with

its power to forgive sins? The cross reaches back, the Bible says, back of Calvary, back, back, back, all the way back to the very beginning, even to Adam and Eve. Yes, Christ died for everybody back of the cross, just like he died for everybody this side of the cross. When Christ died then the sins of the people back of the cross were finally forgiven if they had kept the law of God that they had in the age in which they lived.

## **II. The Right Arm**

What about that right hand arm of the cross, the length of the cross? How far forward does the cross reach with its power to forgive sin? I want you to notice that it is the blood of Jesus Christ that gives remission of sins. We find this in so many passages, but I would like to refer especially to Revelation 5:9, "And they sang a new song: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.'" It is the blood of Jesus Christ that saves from sin. But, how far forward does that blood reach with its power to forgive sins? Well, it reaches forward to us today. We know this because according to Acts 2:38, as Peter concluded his sermon on the day of Pentecost telling those people what to do for the remission of sins, he said to them, "Repent, be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, for the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are afar off, for all whom the Lord our God will call." The length of the cross is such that it reaches forward to us this very day. Those who are willing to accept Jesus and obey Him can be forgiven of their sins.

### *How to Contact the Blood*

How then do we contact the precious blood of Jesus Christ that gives remission of sins? The Bible is quite clear in answering

that question. I want you to look at John 19:34, "Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water." Please mark that verse in your Bible. It is a most significant verse. When Christ died upon the cross what came out of His heart? Blood and water. All through the scriptures, blood and water are joined together when it comes to forgiveness of sins. In the Old Testament dispensation, God required the blood of an animal. Blood mixed with water and the ashes of a heifer were used in the rites of purification that God required under Old Testament worship or Jewish dispensation. As we come over into the New Testament we find that as Christ died upon the cross, the scriptures positively state blood and water came out of His heart.

### *The Blood and Baptism*

That shows me why Jesus Christ taught us to be baptized. It's not because the water washes away our sins, but it is because we contact the blood of Jesus when we are baptized into Christ. How do we contact the blood in baptism? The Bible teaches us quite clearly in romans 6:3-4, "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." What happened when He died? John 19: 34 says that blood and water came out of His heart when He died. If we are baptized into the death of Christ, we know we are baptized in water, because the scriptures quite clearly teach that, Jesus was baptized in the waters of the Jordan River. We follow His example in being baptized, so we are not going to be baptized in air or in dust, we must be baptized in water, just like Jesus was baptized in water. And we are to be baptized into His death. When Jesus died, it was water and blood that came out of His heart. Therefore, as we are baptized in the water it is into the death of Christ. We are buried with Him by baptism in death that like as

Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father even so we should walk in newness of life. As we are baptized in the water, it is not the water that washes away our sins, but it is the blood of Jesus that we contact when we are baptized into His death. Please compare all of these scriptures that we have studied with I John 5:5-8, "Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ. He did not come by water alone, but by water and blood. And it is the spirit who testifies, because the spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement."

*Spirit . . . Water . . . Blood*

When we reach the point that we have real faith in Jesus, we are willing to do what Jesus commands us to do. We are baptized into His death, buried with Him in Christian baptism. That is we have faith enough to go with Jesus right down into the water, not that we believe that the water washes away our sins, but to be buried with Him in the likeness of His death that we might contact His blood. It was water and blood that came out of His heart. As we are baptized in the water, into the death of Christ, it is to meet His blood that we might receive the Holy Spirit. I John 5:5-8 teaches that the blood and the water and the Spirit all bear witness together. As we are baptized into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the water to contact the blood so that we might receive the Holy Spirit, it is the blood of Jesus Christ that cleanses us from every sin. So, the cross reaches back to the very beginning and the cross reaches forward to us.

**III. The Bottom of the Cross**

What about that third dimension of the old rugged cross? Down at the bottom of the cross the prisoner had written the word depth. How far down does the old rugged cross reach? Isaiah 1:18,

in his prophecy, says, "Come now, let us reason together sayeth the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet they shall be white as snow. Though they be red like crimson yet shall they be like wool."

*I Am Too Bad!*

The cross reaches right down into the depth of sin. I've talked to some people who have said, "I am too bad to ever be saved. If you only knew the sins I have committed, then you would know why I cannot go to Heaven." If you are one of those who think you are hopeless, because you have sinned too greatly, I want to ask you, "Have you sinned as much as the people who murdered Jesus? Are you as guilty as the ones who put Jesus to death?" They weren't too great of sinners to be forgiven. It was the murderers of Jesus who heard the first Gospel sermon. It was the murderers of Jesus who were told what to do to be forgiven in Acts 2:38, "Repent and be baptized for the remission of sins." In Acts 2:41 it says that they gladly received the Word and were baptized that same day.

Let me ask you this, if you think you are too bad to be forgiven, are you any worse than Simon Peter, who betrayed Christ, who cursed and swore and said, "No, I wasn't one of them, I wasn't with them." Simon Peter had not sinned too greatly to be forgiven. Jesus did forgive him and allowed him to preach the first Gospel sermon. You say that you have sinned too much and God could never forgive you? Are you any worse than the woman in John 8, who was taken in the very act of adultery? Jesus spoke to that woman and He said, "Neither do I condemn thee. Go and sin no more." You say that you have sinned too much and God could never forgive you. Are you any worse than Saul of Tarsus, who persecuted Christians, who held the garments of those who stoned Stephen to death? He was such a great sinner that Jesus met him on the Damascus road and called out to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?" Are you such a bad sinner that you persecuted

Jesus like Saul did? Saul was not too great of a sinner to be forgiven. He heard Ananias speak to him that commandment from the Lord found in Acts 22:16, "And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on His name."

### *Have I Really Sinned?*

I don't really think that the problem is that you have sinned too much to be forgiven, I think that the real problem is that you may not recognize sin for all the evil it really is, and for the eternal damage, that unforgiven sin can do to your soul.

We are living in times when the devil is deceiving people as never before. For example, do you know what preachers have to face if they are going to preach on the sin of drunkenness today? They have to face a hostile crowd, who comes out the door afterwards or calls up on the telephone during the week, and says, "Preacher, what's wrong with you? You are really old fashioned. You are behind the times, Preacher. Don't you realize there is nothing wrong with drinking? Don't you realize that we are just having a good time? The devil has even changed the name. It's no longer called a bar room, it is called a club. All of that is the devil's attempt to deceive you and to try to convince you that sin is not really sin. It's referred to not as drunkenness, but as social drinking and that is supposed to make it all respectable and decent!!

### *If It Feels Good . . . Do It!*

If the preacher has the nerve to stand up and preach about adultery, you can be sure that people are going to come up to him afterwards and say, "Now, look Preacher, even the law courts of our land say that it's O.K. as long as it is between two consenting adults. What's the matter with you, Preacher? Don't you realize that we are liberated men and women?" You can see it in the

movies and on the television and in all the slick magazines. "Everybody is doing it!" Yes, and I've even noticed a bumper sticker advertising it. It says, "If it feels good, do it!" I was really horrified when I saw that one. "What's the matter, Preacher, adultery is not wrong??"

The young people come around and say, "Oh, Preacher, don't talk to us about fornication. After all, you are being a prude. Why are you old fashioned? You are behind the times. If I want my girlfriend to sleep with me, what's wrong with it? Everybody's doing it!"

### *The Filipina Girl*

I was in the Philippine Islands in February 1977 holding an evangelistic meeting on the island of Mindanao. One night after the church service there was a young Filipina girl who came to me and asked if we could have a talk. She was deeply troubled. I said, "Certainly!" We were scheduled to go out and eat supper after the service, but I canceled. I thought it was more important to talk to her than go and eat. I am so glad I did.

The girl was really troubled. She said, "Brother Reggie, I want to talk to you because I cannot talk to anybody else, I'm too ashamed. But, since you are a stranger and you are only here for a short time and you are going to be gone and I will probably never see you again, well, I've got up my courage and I've just got to tell you what my problem is." I said, "Well, go ahead and tell me." She said, "You see, I've got a boyfriend and I love him very much. There is no doubt that we are deeply in love with each other. There is just one problem."

I said, "What is it?" She said, "Well, he's married. But it's not like you think. His wife has deserted him and they haven't lived together for several years and she's not going to come back. So, you see, really it's O.K. for me to have him as my boyfriend, because he doesn't actually have a wife. Legally he does, but not

really. I know we really haven't been behaving properly, because sometimes when we are out together on a date, it seems like that we go too far. I think you know what I mean?" I said, "Well, I probably do know what you mean." She said, "Well, don't you think God understands, Brother Reggie? I really do love him and I know he loves me and, in fact, we have a happier, loving relationship than even a husband or wife would have. I know we do. And don't you think God understands? And don't you think that God will still let us go to Heaven?"

She ended up telling me that she and her boyfriend were members of the church. Faithful members of the church. Of course, nobody knew what was going on. It was all a big secret. I spoke to this young Filipina girl and I said, "Do you want me to really tell you the honest truth? Are you wanting to know what the Bible says or are you just wanting someone to tell you that what you are doing is O.K.?" She said, "It is more important for me to go to Heaven than anything else and I want to know honestly what does the Bible say. Can I go to Heaven living like I am or not?" And I said to my young Filipina friend, "I don't want to hurt you, but you have asked for the truth and I've got to tell you. You claim that you have a love partner, but really you don't have a love partner; the devil has deceived you and you have a lust partner. I'm sorry to tell you, but according to the scriptures you will not be able to go to Heaven if your are going to continue to live like you are living. You need to repent and break off this adulterous relationship that you have with this married man." The girl left me that night weeping. She really had a heavy heart.

I came back to America and about a month went by and I got a letter from that Filipina girl. She said, "Brother Reggie, I want you to know that after you left the Philippine Islands, I read every scripture that you gave me to read and I really studied what the Bible had to say about my situation. I showed all of these scriptures to my boyfriend and he read them too. We decided that I should write you this letter to let you know that we have broken up our sinful relationship and we both rededicated our lives to Jesus

Christ. I want to thank you for taking the time to tell me the truth." I was really thrilled. I suppose that girl is one in a million, because, usually, when you tell people the truth, they won't believe it. They won't accept it and they won't do anything about it. That is one time when someone did do something about it and I'm so glad that I took the time to talk to that Filipina girl.

Yes, the cross of Jesus Christ does reach down, way down, into the depths of sin, all kinds of sin. Even the sins you are guilty of. I have no idea what your sins are, but the cross will reach down and lift you right up out of your sins if you will be honest with God.

#### **IV. The Top of the Cross.**

What about the height of the cross? Up at the very top the prisoner wrote that word height. How high does that cross reach? The Brocks and their little chorus put it like this:

"Reaching up to God, reaching out to man, reaching down into the depths of sin and shame, the cross of Christ, it reaches me. Oh glory to His name!"

#### *The Death of Bob McGee*

I was preaching years ago at the Church of Christ in Catlin, Illinois. There was a wonderful man in that congregation named Robert McGee. I really learned to love Robert McGee. He was a deacon in the church. He was a soloist, a choir member, he had a beautiful singing voice. He was just 33 years old when he died. I loved that man and respected him so much that we named our fourth son after him. Our fourth son is Robert Timothy Thomas and he is the namesake of Robert McGee, faithful deacon and servant of the Lord. When Robert McGee was 33 years old suddenly without any warning he discovered he had melanoma cancer and within a few weeks he was dead and buried.

*The Night of His Death*

I'll never forget the night he died. It was 5:00 a.m. when his wife JoAnn telephoned me to tell me the news. She said, "could you come out immediately?" Of course I told her, "Yes," and I jumped up, shaved, dressed, and drove out to their farm house. When I arrived, JoAnn was not crying, which didn't surprise me, because she and Bob were two of the strongest Christians that I've ever known in my life. She welcomed me inside the home and she said, "The reason I asked you to come is because I don't know what to tell Bobby and Curt." Bobby and Curt were 8 and 10 years old, respectively. She said, "Would you tell the boys? I really resented that at the time. I thought, "What a difficult thing to do. Why has she asked me to do this? What can I tell those two little boys?" Of course I didn't tell JoAnn how I felt. I just simply said, "Well, I'll do my best." I went into the boys' bedroom and awakened them. And as simply as I knew how told them that their daddy had died. Neither boy shed a tear. They sat up in their beds and they looked at me and Curt, the oldest boy, spoke up first. He said, "Does that mean that Daddy is not going to be sick any longer?" I smiled and said, "That's right, Curt, your Daddy is never going to be sick again." Bobby spoke up and said, "Daddy's gone to Heaven hasn't he?" I said, "That's right, Bobby." He said, "He's going to be happy isn't he?" I said, "Sure he is." Then one of the boys said, "But will we ever see Daddy again?" I said, "Why sure you will. You boys are Christians and your Daddy is also. You are all going to be together in Heaven forever." Those two boys were just perfectly at ease. They laid back down and went back to sleep within a short while.

*The Funeral Plans*

I went back into the living room and sat down to talk with

JoAnn further. She said, "Reggie, I want you to preach an evangelistic sermon at Bob's funeral service. It will be Bob's last time to have a chance to win anybody to Christ. It's got to be an evangelistic sermon. I don't want you to get up there and tell a lot of things about his life. You just get up there and preach the Gospel and invite people to be saved." I said, "OK. I'll do it, if that's what you want." She said, "the boys and I are going to walk in smiling and we are going to walk out smiling, because we want everybody to know that we are glad that Bob could go to Heaven." I thought to myself, "Is it possible that they can do it?"

### *The Funeral*

The day of the funeral came and the biggest crowd ever to assemble in the whole history in the Catlin Church of Christ came that day. More than a thousand people gathered in that sanctuary for Bob McGee's funeral. He was a family man, a community man, a church man, everybody loved and respected him. The custom in Illinois is that the family walks in last. When the family walks in, everybody can look into their faces. It is a very difficult moment. When they walked in, JoAnn, Bobby, and Curt faced that big crowd and all three of them were smiling. It was one of the most powerful testimonies I've ever seen. They sat down and I preached an evangelistic sermon and invited people to follow Jesus. Then, as is the custom in Illinois, the family gets up and they walk out first, facing the crowd again. They walked out smiling!

### *Goodbye*

After the crowd was all gone, JoAnn, Bobby, and Curt came back and they stood beside the casket for just a few moments. Then Bobby and Curt reached their hands inside and they laid their hands on the hand of the lifeless form of what was once their

THE MEASURE OF THE CROSS

Daddy and they said, "Goodbye, Daddy, until we can see you again in Heaven." JoAnn reached over and kissed the cheek of what had once been her husband and she said the same thing. It was really beautiful. In the days that followed there was a great revival that swept the Catlin community. It was the greatest revival in the history of the Catlin Church, a congregation that is more than 100 years old. There were more than 120 additions to the church.

They tell of that city far up in the sky.

I want to go there, I do.

'Tis built in the land of the sweet by and by.

I want to go there, don't you?

There Jesus has gone to prepare us a home.

I want to go there, I do.

Where sickness and sorrow and death hath no power.

I want to go there, don't you?

When Jesus is crowned King of all Kings

I want to be there, I do.

With shouting and singing 'til all Heaven shall ring.

I want to be there, don't you?

We'll all shout "Hallelujah," again and again.

I want to be there, I do.

And then we'll close with that chorus, "Amen and Amen."

I want to be there, I do.

I want to be there. I want to be there.

I expect to be there, I do.

I want to be there, I want to be there.

I expect to be there, do you?

If you do, it's the way of the cross that leads home. And the height of that cross is Heaven itself. Let's bow our head to pray.

Our God in Heaven:

We are thankful that you do love us and that you have proven your love by giving your Son Jesus upon the cross. As we have examined again the four reaches of the cross, we do pray that it may reach into the hearts and lives of men and women and boys

MY FAVORITE MISSIONARY SERMONS

and girls, who need to walk in the way of the cross, following Jesus, that they might be saved. Bless each one who needs to make this decision. We pray that they will do it now without delay, so that they can know the joy of having all their sins forgiven by the blood of Jesus. So that they can live for Christ in such a way as to attract others to follow Him.

We pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen