

# The Cross—Lifting It High

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Is there a one among us who has not seen the picture? The date was February 23, 1945. The place was Iwo Jima, a tiny island 660 nautical miles south of Tokyo. Its possession was key to the outcome of the war in the Pacific. After four days of fierce and bloody fighting, the tide of battle turned in favor of the United States forces. As a symbol of impending victory, four marines raised a United States flag on the island's highest point for all to see. Photographer Joe Rosenthal was there to capture the event with his camera. The resulting photograph was listed recently by a photographic magazine as one of five photographs which changed history.

Now, in place of the flag imagine a cross, not an ordinary cross, but the cross of Christ. In place of the four marines, put an army of God's believers. Replace that 500-foot hill with the world itself, and we have the kind of picture which comes to mind when we hear or sing the words, "Lift High the Cross."

The words themselves are familiar to us. They form the opening line of a hymn which until a few years ago would have been strange to our ears. The tune is a stirring one, and we have come to sing the words with fervor and with joy. More recently we have appropriated the hymn's opening line to designate the special synod-wide offering which has as its goal the expansion of our church's gospel outreach both at home and abroad.

Our purpose today, however, is not to speak primarily of the hymn, nor of the offering as such. Rather, our focus will be that intended by our district officers, who, in assigning this essay and suggesting use of the hymn words as its theme, expressed the desire that "we be given gospel encouragement for carrying out the wonderful privilege the Lord has given us for lifting high the cross before the world in all we do."

In other words, our eyes will be directed first of all to the cross and only secondarily to any activity in which we ourselves might be engaged. It is to allow for this shift in focus that we have chosen slightly to modify the theme as originally proposed and to speak of

## THE CROSS-LIFTING IT HIGH

In considering this theme, we shall be well served if we see

I. The Cross, God's mighty power to save

II. The Cross, God's gracious message meant for all

### I.

The cross. We see it everywhere, so much so that we can easily forget what it really is and what it stands for. There are replicas on every hand. We wear them on our lapels, hang them on our walls, picture them on bumper stickers, and have made them part of our *Come to the WELS* logo. Often they are intricately designed, carefully molded and carved, beautifully engraved, varnished, and gilded so that they only remotely resemble the cross as it really was.

The cross, however, was anything but beautiful. In ancient times anyone displaying it in his home or on his person would have been regarded as peculiar or strange. It symbolized a cruelty hard to imagine even in our violent and destructive age and represented a method of execution which could only have come from the depraved and perverted working of a pagan mind.

Crucifixion was an excruciatingly painful form of death. It was usually carried out beyond the city wall and, in Jerusalem at least, in a place especially set aside for this purpose. The crucifixion itself was preceded by scourging with thongs embedded with bits of bone or metal. The condemned person was stripped of his clothes, fastened to a previously erected cross with cords or nails, and left to die a most horrible death. That death at times was days in coming. More often than not, the body was left there to be devoured by vultures and beasts.

Yet we look at the cross and say, "Lift it high." Why?

The answer is to be found only in the Word of God. To learn what is meant by *the cross* we shall have to see how the word is used in Scripture. There are some 28 Bible verses in which it is found. In addition, the word "crucify" or "crucified" is used approximately 40 times in the Gospels and Epistles.

In its most obvious meaning the word "cross" designates the wood on which the Son of God was crucified. In a transferred sense Jesus on occasion used it to denote and describe the sufferings endured by believers at the hands of an unbelieving world because of their faith in him. Scripture also speaks of the sufferings of believers in general as a cross, especially the struggle against the Old Adam.

When we speak and sing of lifting high the cross, we clearly have something more in mind. Our primary focus is not on the physical aspect of the crucifixion but on that which God has accomplished for us in the death of his Son.

What this is, is clear already in God's first promise of a Savior. It is beautifully unfolded throughout the Old Testament with its rich and comforting prophecies concerning the death of the Messiah who was still to come. Where is there, for instance, a finer and fuller view of all that the Savior did for us than in the 53rd chapter of Isaiah's prophecy and particularly in verses 4 and 5?

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

The reason for all of this? We need but go to the following verse:

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

The four Gospels likewise unfold for us both the purpose and the fruit of his suffering and death. They not only recount the details of Jesus' passion, but permit us at the same time to look into the Savior's heart as he instructs and comforts his disciples the evening before his death, as he seeks to draw Judas back from his dastardly deed, and as with a glance he brings Peter to repentance. The Gospel writers record Jesus' prayer asking forgiveness for his tormentors, his promise of the bliss of heaven to a dying criminal, and his concern for Mary, his mother. They let us hear his agonizing cry to the God who had forsaken him, and then finally the confident and victorious prayer commending his spirit into the hands of his heavenly Father.

We have chosen today, however, to limit our look at Scripture to several key verses in the Epistles which speak specifically and directly of *the cross*. Time constraints will not permit us to look at every such verse nor to explore the few we have selected as fully as they deserve. What we see, however, can only cause us to marvel that God should have chosen a way such as this to redeem us from the power and hold of sin. Our choice of passages and the attention given to each of them may be arbitrary, but the message which flows from them is clear and comforting. That message first of all is that *the cross is God's mighty power to save*.

Perhaps to our surprise, the passage we look at first does not contain the word "cross" as such. Galatians 3:13 tells us, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'"

Even a quick reading will tell us that the reference is to Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. The Jews did not themselves practice crucifixion but used stoning as the means of carrying out capital punishment. The

"tree" in the Deuteronomy passage quoted by Paul was not the device used for execution, but rather was employed as a means of showing and declaring openly and graphically the curse that rested on the one who had been executed and whose body was then hung on a tree or wooden post. As used in this verse, the word "tree" is clearly a reference to the fact that Jesus hung on a cross.

Paul explains how this came to be. Just a few verses previously he had quoted Deuteronomy 27:26, saying, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." Everyone—and that includes each one of us—has disobeyed the law and is under its curse. That curse rests on us from the moment we are conceived. Its ultimate and most fearsome expression is found in the words which those on Jesus' left will hear from his lips at the final judgment, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

It was to redeem us from that curse that Jesus "humbled himself and became obedient unto death—even death on a cross" (Php 2:8). The Son of God became a curse for us. That was the price of our redemption.

Who can comprehend this? He who was perfect and without sin became a curse so that we who were sinners might be redeemed from that curse. Dr. R. C. H. Lenski observes, "Not some part of our curse affected him through his contact with us, but our whole curse was on him so that he was all curse."<sup>1</sup>

Other portions of Scripture say the same thing, though in different words. Isaiah saw clearly what was to happen on Golgotha when he said, "The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Peter tells the readers of his First Epistle (2:24), "He himself bore our sins in his own body on the tree." Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:21 are even stronger, "God made him who had no sin *to be sin for us.*"

What an astounding way to save us! God did not make his Son a sinner. He made him "to be sin for us." He left his Son sinless as he always was, but laid on him the iniquity of us all. By the will of his heavenly Father, Jesus became "a curse for us." In him was no sin. On him was all sin, including yours and mine. It sounds incredible that God should have done this to his Son, the Son whom he loved, the Son in whom he was well pleased. This, however, is what God did. He did it to save us, and the message of the cross is God's declaration that it is so.

The wonderful result? Our perfect reconciliation to God. The complete forgiveness of our sin and total removal of all that had made us accursed before him. The cross was the way God chose "to reconcile to himself all things." He did it by "making peace through his (Jesus'] blood shed on the cross" (Col 1:2). It is as Paul states in 2 Corinthians 5:18-21:

*But God has done it all. He reconciled us to Himself, through Christ...God did this in this way: In Christ He reconciled the world to Himself by not counting their sins against them...God made Him who did not sin to be sin for us, that in Him we might become righteous before God (GWN).*

This is the remarkable way God chose to save us, to redeem us fully and eternally from the power and hold of sin. This is how he determined once more to make us his true children and to give us a hope which will come to fruition in that wonderful moment when we hear him who was crucified speak the word not a one of us has deserved to hear, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world" (Mt 25:34).

Such is the power of the cross. Truly, it is God's power to save. Would that we never lose our sense of wonder at that which he has done for us, and that in viewing the cross we ever marvel as did Paul in his letter to the Romans:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out!...For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! (11:33,36).

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<sup>1</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Galatians, to the Ephesians and to the Philippians* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1946), p 151.

It is here that lifting high the cross begins. Lifting high the cross is not in and of itself some heroic and highly visible activity which draws attention to itself. It is rather the day-to-day life and activity of the redeemed child of God. It is the father bringing up his children in the training and instruction of the Lord. It is the mother in love standing at his side and caring for the little ones the Lord has placed into their home. It is the child, whether kindergartner or teenager, obeying its parents in the Lord.

Lifting high the cross is the young person resisting the temptations which abound and remaining pure and decent in words and actions; the laborer "doing something useful with his hands, that he may share with those who are in need"; the friend and neighbor ready "to give the reason for the hope" they have. It is the believing husband and wife honoring and loving one another in a marriage which reflects God's love and saving will for them. It is the terminally ill child of God, courageously facing each day as the Lord gives it and serving as a beautiful example of Christian faith and perseverance. Lifting high the cross is the aged person, perhaps weak and physically decrepit, patiently waiting for the Lord and committing all things to his care.

Hardly spectacular activities. Yet, in the finest sense of the word, these are a lifting high of the cross. They are the day-to-day manifestation of the new life which God has given to those he has made his own through faith in Christ. Paul put it all in place when he told the Corinthians, "Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God," and almost with the same breath declared, "I am not seeking my good, but the good of many, so that they may be saved." *For the glory of God....So that all may be saved.* That is what lifting high the cross is all about.

Where will we receive strength for such a life of faith? Surely not in the world and its faith-destroying outlook on life; not in the self-centered philosophies propounded and pandered by the afternoon TV talk shows or the thoughts so often passed off as new insights by the more serious commentators both on the air and in the printed media.

There is one source of power and one alone for our life of faith. That is *the cross*. It is the reason the writer to the Hebrews urges, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross." There and there alone will we, by his grace, receive the strength we need in order not to "grow weary and lose heart" (He 12:2,3).

The means by which this power is given to us is what Paul calls "the message (*λόγος*, or word) of the cross" (1 Cor 1:18). The word of the cross is all that God has revealed to us about our salvation. It is nothing more nor less than the gospel of which the apostle tells us that "it is the power of God" (Ro 1:16). It is the means by which his Holy Spirit has brought us to faith. It is the means by which he keeps us in faith and gives us both the will and the strength in our lives of faith to lift high the cross.

How then we ought daily to be found in the word of the cross, absorbing its precious message and finding strength in its power. Our need is not for more "how to do" articles and books, but for growing in our understanding and appreciation of God's Word. We are fortunate in our day that the Lord has placed into our hands new and excellent Bible translations whose language is readily understood. An unusually fine aid for our study of the Word has come into our hands in the form of *The People's Bible*. Particularly precious devotional reading is to be found in the three hundred meditations gathered into the three volumes of *For Such a Time as This*. In our generation there has not been finer Bible-based and Bible-centered reading than this. It is here in the Word that we will find strength, for the cross in our day is still, as it has always been, God's mighty power to save.

What is true for us as individuals, is true also for us in our work as a church. It is significant that Paul's ministry did not center on himself. It did not draw its strength from human wisdom. Rather, it had everything to do with the cross. He was able to say to the Corinthians, "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence and superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:1,2).

"Jesus Christ and him crucified." Beautifully simple. But not at all simplistic. Paul told the elders of the church of Ephesus in that memorable farewell meeting on Miletus, "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God [all the contents of the plan of God, GWN]." His preaching and teaching, even as ours needs

to be, was completely in line with the Savior's all-time instruction to his church, to "teach them to pay close attention to everything I have commanded you" (Mt 28:20, GWN).

The temptation is always there to look for something which is "more" than the message of the cross. This is especially the case as we face problems, which, though not new, are particularly pressing in today's self-centered, hedonistic, and materialistic world. To solve these problems, we are offered this plan and program or that. Often these are built around and flow from human wisdom and experience as much as from the Word of God.

What, however, is the power of God? It is the cross. What is the means by which that power works among us? It is the word of the cross. This is the power of God to save us, and this is the power he has given us to overcome the problems and difficulties which result when sin has taken the upper hand.

We could think of a good number of situations in which this is true. Perhaps one of the most pressing of the problems currently facing us, and certainly one which has the potential for the greatest damage to the church and to society, is the one having to do with marriage and the family. Where shall we go for answers? To the wise of the world? Too often they do not even recognize that a problem exists. To the use of techniques which are more often based on psychology than they are on the Word of God?

To do so is to forget or to underestimate the fact that there is a power sufficiently great to overcome what is wrong. It is the cross. Where this is the center of the marriage relationship, all else will fall into place. Where the heart is filled with amazement at the wonder of our forgiveness before God, will there not also be a willingness to pray the Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer with all that this implies?

It is significant that in dealing with the matter of marriage, Paul begins with the cross. Nothing finer has ever been written about the entire relationship between husband and wife and then of the relationship of parents and children than we find in Ephesians, chapters five and six. It is significant that the key lead-in passage is in the closing verse of chapter 4: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." That is the cross. That is the heart of it all. It is on the basis of what God did for us in Christ that Paul then says, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands *as to the Lord*....Husbands, love your wives, *just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her.*"

These things were written not just as a bandage to cover the sore of the moment, but as a way of life. Here is the power not only to save the individual sinner, but to give and preserve the kind of blessings God has intended in the midst of a sinful world for husband and wife and family. Using the message of the cross as God has intended is the very essence of lifting high the cross.

This is true of the many other problems which face us as well: church and communion attendance, finances, the indifference of so many, the living together outside the bonds of marriage, the willingness in so many ways to go along with the immorality of the world. The answer is always in the cross of Christ, in leading our people to live in the shadow of that cross and in gaining anew an appreciation for the salvation which is ours by virtue of that which he, our Savior, has done for us.

Who among us would not like to have a *congregation like* the one described in Acts, chapter four?

*Verse 31.* They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

*Verse 32.* All the believers were of one heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but shared everything they had.

*Verse 34.* There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales,

*Verse 35.* and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

"But," you will say, "you've skipped a verse." Not really. We've saved it because it provides the key to this wonderful manifestation of the faith of God's people. We read in

*Verse 33.* With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord, and much grace was with them all.

"Testifying to the resurrection of the Lord" is nothing more nor less than proclaiming in full the word of the cross. The power of their preaching was not their own; it was the power of God. They preached not their own wisdom, but the cross of Christ. It was the message of the cross, culminating in Christ's great Easter victory over death, which brought into being such a wonderful people of God.

What a rich comfort for us! The word will still fall on different kinds of soil, but the fact remains that "the message of the cross...is the power of God." Of that word the Lord tells us, "It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Is 55:11).

Then with all of the strength God gives, *Lift High the Cross*. It is and remains *God's mighty power to save*.

## II.

We are the beneficiaries. The fact that we are here for the kind of gathering which has brought us together is evidence that it is so. Nor are we alone in the blessings we have. We have come from 153 congregations scattered throughout northern Wisconsin and Upper Michigan. At home and about their daily activities while we are here are more than 60,000 others, family members, friends, fellow believers, all of them members of the congregations which we here today represent. Each of us, whether here or back home, is a fruit of the preaching of the gospel, evidence of the saving power of the cross.

The cross is not, however, meant for us alone. This, too, is clear not only in those passages which speak specifically of the cross, but throughout all of Scripture.

We turn once more to the third chapter of Paul's letter to the Galatians. Immediately following the verse which speaks so clearly of Jesus' redeeming us by becoming a curse for us, the apostle writes:

*He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.*

The "blessing given to Abraham" is nothing more nor less than the full salvation gained for us through Jesus' perfect obedience, his suffering and death on the cross, and his resurrection from the dead. Though the Savior had not yet come, Abraham had this blessing by promise. "He believed God," Paul states earlier in this same letter, "and it was credited to him as righteousness" (3:6).

This blessing the Lord has intended for all. The very reason Jesus became accursed was that God's full and free forgiveness should come not only to Abraham and his descendants, but to all people.

This thought did not originate with Paul. It is the message of all Scripture, beginning with God's very first promise of the Savior. Look where you will, the word is always the same. Already in the garden God declared that the victory to be won by the woman's Seed over the serpent and his seed was a victory in behalf of every descendant of Eve. Generations later, Noah as "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Pe 2:5) proclaimed not only God's impending judgment, but above all the message of God's grace and forgiveness to a world which was desperately in need of hearing it. Repeatedly, God revealed his saving purpose for all people to Abraham, his son, and grandson in the promise, "And *all people on earth* will be blessed through you."

The Psalms contain more than 175 references to the nations of the world and to God's saving will concerning them.

The prophets speak similarly. Where is there a finer declaration of God's intention that the message of the cross be carried to the far ends of the earth than in the book of Isaiah? From its introductory chapters with their reference to "the last days" when "the Lord's temple will be established...and all nations will stream to it" to the closing chapter and the Lord's promise that he will "gather all nations and tongues, and they will see my glory," this rich book of prophecy brings us one striking and powerful statement after another that God intends the blessing of salvation in Christ for all people.

Look where you will, the message is the same. It all culminates in the words of Jesus' Great Commission. "All nations" are to hear the word which alone can make them his disciples. "To the ends of the

earth" is the extent to which Jesus' disciples are to carry the message of forgiveness and salvation in Christ. Clearly, the cross is God's gracious message meant for all.

The proclamation of that message is much more than just the high privilege of a few. It is a sacred obligation God has placed on all his believers. He has chosen, with the exception of a few isolated and limited instances, to entrust the proclamation of the gospel not to angels, but to those who themselves have heard the good news and by its saving power have come to faith. It was to all who followed him that Jesus spoke the words commissioning them to go to all nations with the gospel. Peter had every believer in mind when he wrote, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have" (1 Pe 3:15). At the time of the first persecution in Jerusalem, all who had been scattered proclaimed the good news wherever they went (Ac 8:1-4). These, as one commentator observes, were ordinary Christians; they did not set themselves up as preachers, but told people why they had to leave Jerusalem and thus testified to their faith in Christ Jesus. It is God's believers, *all of them*, who are to lift high the cross, so that by his grace others, too, might receive the blessings of salvation.

So where do we begin? The words of the Great Commission imply that lifting high the cross begins with faithfulness to his Word. Jesus told his disciples to teach those to whom they brought the word to "obey everything I have commanded you." Paul wrote to Titus, "You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine" (Tt 2:1). Similarly, he told Timothy, "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus" (2 Tin 1:13). To the Corinthians he wrote, "By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you" (1 Cor 15:2). It is God's intention that those who reach out with the word of the cross should themselves firmly hold to the full truth of his Word.

This is the solid base on which we need to stand if we are to lift high the cross. Thirty years ago this past fall while our family was waiting for the government permit which would permit me to enter Northern Rhodesia to work in our young mission field there, I had opportunity to preach to one of our larger congregations in southern Wisconsin. People had raised the question as to how they could best support a missionary in his ministry overseas. The sermon addressed that question and gave as the number one answer, "By yourselves here at home remaining faithful to the Word." We have a gospel to share only if we ourselves by God's grace hold fast to the full truth of his Word.

Having said this, we need to recognize the extent to which the Lord has preserved that solid base among us. In a humbling, yet strengthening assessment, Professor Ernst H. Wendland stated several years ago,

By the grace of God we have continued to uphold and "to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints." Modern liberalism has not infiltrated our ranks with its homocentric humanism so that we have lost our credibility as a Church of Jesus Christ and with it our mission in the world (Missiological Perspectives, 1981).

That it is so, is not our doing. It is God's. Let us thank him for it and pray that amid the growing pressures to do otherwise, we continue in his Word so that we may be his disciples indeed and know the truth which alone can and does make us free. Reaching out to the lost dare never be an occasion for softening or modifying the message. If anything, the less those to whom we bring the message know of the cross, the more critical is the need to hold fast, to practice, and to proclaim sound doctrine.

It is when we thus know, believe, and confess the full truth of the Word that we not only have a message to share but also have a most powerful incentive to reach out to others and to lift high the cross. In his lectures at the 1980 Fall Pastors Institute, Professor Armin Schuetze, then president of our Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, commented:

We believe the truth about Christ, that his atonement is for all men, that God will have all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. *That is a part of our sound doctrine* (emphasis added). But can we truly believe that and not be concerned that all men may get to hear what

God has most surely prepared for them too? Can we have the truth without concern about the people who don't as yet know it?

Professor Wendland in quoting the foregoing, adds the comment, "Concern for the truth of the gospel must lead to a concern for people. That is our Lutheran motivation for doing mission work. May the Lord increase that concern in our midst" (*Missiological Perspectives*, 1981).

It is in place to observe that where God's truth remains, there his work goes on. The two men we have quoted are veterans of the cross. We have perhaps often taken comfort in their presence and in the presence of others like them. We know where they stand and would be very comfortable if we could keep them ever with us. The obituary column of *The Northwestern Lutheran* and the "In Memoriam" page of the *Statistical Report* remind us in no uncertain terms that it is not we, but God who determines the time we have to do his work. One of the two men just quoted wrote to your essayist a few weeks ago, "How many years do we still have left?" We do not know, but we do know that as the work passes on to other hands, God's Word remains, and his kingdom work goes on. That work is dependent not on the messenger, but on a message which does not change, the message of the cross.

It is also in place to note that this is true of other aspects of kingdom work as well. Apart from his Word, the tools and resources the Lord places into our hands do not forever remain the same. He endows his believers with the ability to judge whether these tools need to be repaired or replaced, whether they simply need to be sharpened, or whether it is time for them to be discarded in favor of others better suited to the need and the task at hand. Even our favorite tools in the final analysis are no more permanent than the workers who use them.

What does remain is the word of the cross. Everything else, including heaven and earth itself, is temporary. God's Word, however, remains, as does its power to save. We can only ask that he keep us faithful, that in a world which surrounds us with pressures to improvise, to modify, and to soften the message, he would continue to hallow his name in our midst and preserve the truth of his Word among us.

The result will be blessing. He promises it; and what God promises, he also performs. Not only does he in so many words assure us that it is so. From time to time he permits us even with our weak human vision to witness remarkable instances of the working of his grace through the power of his Word.

It is appropriate that in closing we take note of one or two such instances. They may not be significantly different from those which anyone of us here could relate. We mention them, however, to show the power of the message of the cross and the blessing which it brings.

Though it happened 43 years ago, memory of the event remains sharp and vivid. Our congregation's Christian elementary school was still in its early stages. One evening the phone rang. A deep, resonant voice asked, "Can we get our son, Bob, into your school?" Though I had not met the man, I responded that we would be glad to enroll his son and that at the same time we would invite him and his wife to attend our adult information class. Only then could they know and appreciate what we would be doing for their son.

Bob was enrolled. The parents completed the six-month Bible study course and expressed the wish to become members of the congregation. Bob's father a few years later became president of the congregation.

The following fall the mother and another woman confirmed with her decided to attend the information class a second time. Halfway through the course (Riess, *What Does the Bible Say?*), we came to the chapter on the humiliation of Christ. The lesson that evening began with a brief audio-visual presentation of the earthly life of Christ and of his passion and death. This was followed by a study of various key Bible passages and their rich and comforting answers to the questions, "What did Christ accomplish by all that he did and suffered?" and, "Who receives the benefit of the redemption wrought by Christ?"

That evening Bob's mother and her friend remained after the others had left. "You will never know," she said, "what it meant to my husband and myself when we learned that Christ had died also for our sins. When my husband called you that evening, we thought that Bob was still young enough so that there was hope for him. We thought our sins were so many that they could no longer be forgiven." Wonderful is the power of the cross and most precious the blessing it brings to hearts troubled by sin!



Another instance comes to mind, this one from one of our world mission fields. One of the very real privileges given to our missionaries is that of seeing the power of the message of the cross at work and in the most primitive of settings witnessing the blessing which it brings.

Some of you have heard me tell the story of old Malasha. The only one in his family who was a Christian, he lived in a tiny outlying village in Zambia. At the time I came to know him he was desperately sick. His open wounds were so bad and so odorous that he had to spend his last days outside under a small tree rather than inside his small hut.

I shall not forget the last time I saw this aged believer. I had come to give him the Lord's Supper. Placing my private communion set onto a piece of wood lying on the dusty ground, I crouched next to him and asked him the questions which are part of the Confession of Sins.

"Do you confess that you are a sinner?" A grunt and a nod of his head was his way of saying, "I do." "Do you believe that Jesus is your Savior and that he died for your sins?" In a clear, distinct voice he answered, "*Maningi...Very much!*" "Do you intend with the help of God the Holy Spirit to amend your sinful life?" Again, a nod of the head was his affirmative answer.

"*Maningi...Very much!*" That was the faith and hope he had in Christ. That night Malasha died, and I am certain that for this poor Lazarus also God sent his holy angels so that they should carry his soul into Abraham's bosom and into the glory of eternal life. So great is the power of the cross. So sure and so wonderful is the blessing God gives through its saving message.

Truly, what our Lord commands, he also blesses. Instances such as these are multiplied for us today by the thousands and tens of thousands. The reports before this convention are dramatic reminders that it is so. Our synod's membership, which 100 years ago was largely confined to Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan, has reached out into every one of the 50 states of our country and into neighboring Canada as well. The possibilities for further outreach are endless.

Less than one week ago, a book reached the sales counter at Northwestern Publishing House titled, *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People*. It tells the story not only of that convention in 1892 which resolved to look for a tribe in the southwestern part of the United States onto whose territory no Christian missionary of any denomination had as yet set foot, but also details what has happened in these 100 years so that names like Zambia and Indonesia and Japan and a dozen others have become household words among us, and we count more than 35,000 members in the churches around the world which are the result of our holding high the cross. Almost daily, new names are being added to the list of places which are beckoning to us—Russia, Bulgaria, Rumania, to name a few—all of them forceful reminders that it is as true today as it was in the days of the apostles that *the cross is indeed God's message meant for all*.

Our finest and fullest view of the power of the cross and the extent of the blessing it brings is, however, yet to come. St. John gives us a preview by describing what he one day, in a most remarkable way, was given the privilege to see.

It is a thrilling scene which he unfolds for us (Re 7:9-17). "*A great multitude* that no man could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb...wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands."

*Who are they?* An elder told John, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

*What is the nature of their blessing?* "Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every **tear from their** eyes."

It is no wonder that they cry out with a loud voice:

Salvation belongs to our God,  
who sits on the throne,  
and to the Lamb.

The angels before the throne share their joy and worship God, saying:

Amen!  
Praise and glory  
and wisdom and thanks and honor  
and power and strength  
be to our God for ever and ever.  
Amen!

Such is the power of the cross! Such is the eternal blessing it brings! *God give us grace so that we may ever lift it high!*