Living Sermons

A BILLY GRAHAM CLASSIC SERMON

THE REAL MEANING OF THE CROSS

EPHESIANS 3:18-19

"You can be anything, but you can't get beyond the love of God. The cross reaches to the very gates of hell."

BILLY GRAHAM

Hartford, Connecticut

Transcribed and Published by **Livingsermons.com**

THE REAL MEANING OF THE CROSS

Preacher: Billy Graham

Publisher: LivingSermons.com

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Living Sermons

FOREWORD

Of all the emblems in the world, none is so admired, glorified and worshiped as the cross. In this message, preached at his Southern New England crusade in Hartford, Connecticut, Billy Graham asks what it really means.

Dr. Graham traces the cross from an instrument of torture to the symbol of the Christian faith, and insists that we all, not one people, put Christ there. He measures the breadth, length, height and depth of the love shown at the cross, describes the wounds Jesus suffered, and then listens, one by one, to the sayings from the cross, from “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” to “It is finished,” and the promise to a dying thief: “Today you will be with Me in paradise.”

His tone is reverent, tender and searching, with stories of a man who killed his mother and later became a minister, and of a woman who tried to bury her guilt in her garden.

In preparing this edition, we have preserved the preacher’s message and wording. We removed time stamps and broadcast material, trimmed a few spoken repetitions, arranged the transcript into chapters with subheadings, and corrected punctuation, capitalization and obvious transcription errors.

Two thieves hung beside Jesus. As you read, ask yourself which cross you are on.

Wisdom Epsi
— The Chief Editor, LivingSermons.com

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This book is a faithful transcript of a live sermon delivered by the preacher under the inspiration and unction of the Holy Spirit. Every effort has been made to preserve the preacher's exact words, tone, flow, and spiritual authority, while carefully proofreading and formatting the message into a clear and readable ebook format.

The message you are about to read was originally ministered in a live congregational setting. As such, it carries the weight, urgency, and atmosphere of that sacred gathering. Minor grammatical and structural adjustments have been made solely to enhance readability, without altering the substance, intent, or power of the original delivery.

Watch the live sermon from which this message was transcribed on YouTube

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MAIN MESSAGE BEGINS HERE

CHAPTER 1

THE EMBLEM OF THE CROSS

A GRAPHIC PICTURE

One of the television networks ran a series of five programs on the early days of Christianity, and they included the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It was one of the most graphic pictures I have ever seen.

And among all the emblems of the world, none is admired, glorified and worshiped like the cross. It was the instrument of Christ's suffering and death. And it's also the instrument of our salvation.

THE HISTORY OF THE CROSS

The history of the cross is very interesting, because it goes back to India; it goes back to China, long before Christ ever came. And the victim, as you know, was fastened to the cross by cords, or his hands were nailed, and he was left to die. With the heat of the sun, the pull of his body, and the torture that he'd had before he was on the cross, it sometimes took two and three days, and sometimes a week, for a person to die on a cross. It was the most terrible, the most awful, the most painful way to die that we can imagine.

But by the time of Constantine in the fourth century, when he had become a Christian, or a professing Christian, the cross as an instrument of torture had been abolished. And later, Christian nations started to use the cross as a symbol of Christianity. It was embossed upon their chariots, upon whatever they had. And the cross became the symbol of everything that Christianity stood for. And through such organizations as the Red Cross, it's become an international sign of goodwill and help to other people.

CHAPTER 2

WHO CRUCIFIED CHRIST?

CRUCIFYING HIM AFRESH

Hebrews, the sixth chapter, says:

> *For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God, and the power of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again to repentance; seeing that they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put Him to open shame.*
>
> **HEBREWS 6:4-6**

Every time the Gospel is proclaimed, those who hear the message and receive Christ as Savior come by way of the cross. But if you neglect or refuse God's offer of love and mercy from the cross, you help crucify Jesus Christ.

ALL OF US

That's the reason it's wrong to say that the Jews crucified Christ, as Christians said, especially in the Middle Ages. And they used to try to make converts of Jews at the end of a sword, or by pointing a gun at their heads or a knife at their throats, because they said they were Christ-killers. They did not kill Christ.

You know who killed Christ? All of us. We all had a part in His death. Because His death was planned before the foundation of the world, because of sin. And the Bible says, "We've all sinned and come short of the glory of God."

CHAPTER 3

THE FOUR DIMENSIONS OF THE CROSS

THE BREADTH

There are four dimensions of the cross that I think about when I talk about it.

I think about the breadth of the cross. The love of Christ manifested in the cross of Christ includes everybody. God's love extends to Africa, to Asia, to Latin America, to Russia, to China, to America, to Canada, to the whole world. It includes you, whoever you are, whatever your religion, or if you have no religion. God loves you. And He says from the cross, "I love you."

THE LENGTH

Then there's the length of the cross. It has no measure. It extends from eternity to eternity, from everlasting to everlasting.

When Noah built the ark, do you know how long it was? Four hundred and fifty feet long. When Solomon built the temple, do you know how long it was? Sixty cubits. If you build a shed for garden tools, you can measure the lumber with a ruler. But how can you measure from end to end God's love in the cross?

The Bible says—Paul said—that God's love surpasses knowledge. There's no way that our finite minds can even begin to understand the love of God that would give His Son on the cross to die for you, because you and I deserved that death. We deserved hell and judgment.

THE HEIGHT

And then I think of the height of the cross. It extends to the throne of God. It doesn't matter how high heaven is; through the cross God draws all men to Him. And you have to make a decision about Jesus Christ.

Scientists are looking out into space further and further and further, but they can't get away from God. The subject of astronomy and the subject of the space frontier are very exciting to me. There are scientists here tonight who know far more about the height of the universe than I can ever explain. But heaven is out there somewhere. We don't know exactly where.

A PLACE CALLED HEAVEN

You say, "Do you believe heaven is a place?" Yes, I believe it's a place. I believe I'm going to see the golden streets and walk on them. And I believe I'm going to live in a… well, I think I'll live in a shack. Some of you will live in mansions.

Yes, heaven is going to be a glorious place. And you cannot go beyond God's love, even in heaven.

THE DEPTH

And then there's the depth of God's love in the cross. You can fall to the very bottomless pit of sin and degradation, and you can live like an animal. You can be a murderer. You can be a rapist. You can be anything. But you can't get beyond the love of God. The cross reaches to the very gates of hell. How deep is it?

There are people today who are trying to find how deep they can go into the heart of the earth, and how deep space is. They can't get away from God. As we study the depths of energy, we're looking for unity. That's one of the reasons they're making that study in Illinois.

And the Bible says, “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” It can draw every sinner up to the exalted height of heaven. “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me,” said Jesus.

CHAPTER 4

THE SUFFERING OF CHRIST

FIVE WOUNDS

Think of the cross a moment, and think of His suffering for you and for me. It's said that Jesus endured five basic wounds, as medical science defines them.

First, contusion, when they beat Him on the head and tortured Him and put a crown of thorns on Him—for you.

Laceration: they bared His back and took long leather whips with steel pellets on the end, and beat Him until He was bleeding from head to toe. That was the Roman way. They tortured prisoners before they took them to the cross.

Then there was penetration, when they crushed that crown of thorns on His brow, and His head bled.

There was perforation, when they drove the nails through His hands and feet.

There was incision, when they put the spear in His side.

OUR SINS PUT HIM THERE

That suffering—those nails through His hands and feet—were driven by you and me, and all the peoples of the world, because we all had a part in the death of Christ because of our sins. Our sins put Him on the cross. And you participated.

You may be watching by television somewhere, and you would like to come to the cross tonight and find God's love and God's forgiveness and God's touch on your life. You'll see a number on the screen there. You can call it, and there are counselors standing by, ready to talk with you. You might have to call several

times. But keep calling; you'll get somebody. They'll be there all evening. And they'll help you, and send you some literature to help you understand and to help you live the Christian life. And I'm going to ask people here, after a while, to come to Christ.

CHAPTER 5

“MY GOD, MY GOD”

THE SAYINGS FROM THE CROSS

And then I want us to look at the cross from another point of view. I want us to look at the sayings of Christ from the cross. We usually hear a sermon like this on Good Friday, and that’s about it. But most of us don’t go to church on Good Friday, so we never hear it.

PROPHESIED LONG BEFORE

There are twenty-eight prophecies in the Old Testament about the cross—whole chapters. There’s Genesis 22 and Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 and Leviticus 16 that especially deal with the suffering of Christ on the cross, hundreds and thousands of years before He ever went to the cross. The writers of the Old Testament were under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

"THOU ART HOLY"

And the first one comes from Psalm 22. Jesus was quoting Scripture when He said, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” That’s a quote from Psalm 22. But then you go on a little bit further, and you’ll see why He said it, because the Scripture says, “But Thou art holy.”

You’ll never understand the Old Testament with all of its blood sacrifices. You’ll never understand the Bible. You’ll never understand the death of Christ on the cross, till you understand that God is a holy and righteous and pure God, and He cannot even look upon evil.

MADE TO BE SIN

So in that terrible moment of the agony of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross, He was lonely, forsaken by His friends. And then a shadow came, for the first time since eternity began, between God the Father and God the Son. Because God cannot look upon sin, and in that moment He was laying your sins and mine on Christ. And Christ was suffering for us.

And in that mysterious moment, "He was made to be sin for us who knew no sin." Do you know what that means? Made to be sin! He had never known sin. He never told a lie. He never had an evil thought. He never had any greed or lust. All of a sudden, all of that filth and dirt from your life and my life descended on Him.

And none of us will ever understand the mystery of that moment. No theologian can explain it—to my satisfaction, at least. It was God's great love for you that allowed His Son to take that suffering.

CHAPTER 6

"FATHER, FORGIVE THEM"

"I THIRST"

And then the second thing from the cross that we hear is when He said, "I thirst." And that's a fulfillment of Psalm 69:21.

And when He said, "I thirst," they gave Him vinegar to drink mingled with gall: and when He had tasted thereof, He would not drink. He'd taste it—as we read in John, another one of the Gospels—but He didn't drink it. Why? Because it would have been a sedative. It would have taken away some of the suffering. And He was there to take all the suffering, in absolute consciousness, for you and for me. He wouldn't take it. He must suffer the terrible agony and carry our sins on the cross in full consciousness for you. And if you had been the only person in the whole world, He would have died for you.

SEVENTY-TWO THOUSAND ANGELS

And then, in Luke 23:34, is another thing that He said from the cross. He said, "Father, forgive them; they don't know what they do." Now He's talking about those soldiers that were nailing Him, the crowd that was out there yelling and screaming at Him.

Seventy-two thousand angels drew their swords, ready to come and rescue Him. And He said, "No. I'm doing it because I love them."

SOMEONE QUALIFIED

You see, you and I had sinned against God. We had broken His laws. And He said, "In the day that you break My law, you will suffer and die." He said that to Adam and Eve. They broke His law. They sinned. That's what sin is.

You see, God never meant that anybody would ever die. And God did not create hell for us. But we deliberately rebelled against God. And God would not be God—He wouldn't be just and righteous and holy—if He came along and patted us on the back and said, "You're forgiven." We had to die for our own sins, or somebody who was qualified had to die for us. And that Person who was qualified was Jesus Christ. And He volunteered to do it. He died in our place.

BURYING OUR GUILT

I heard about a woman writing to a columnist who said that her cure for guilt was to go to the back garden, dig a hole in the earth, lie down on her stomach, speak all of her guilt and confess all of her wrongs into that place that she'd dug, and then cover it up.

People will do almost anything to get rid of their guilt. For centuries people have done desperate things to bury their guilt. The place to get rid of guilt is at the cross.

JAMES NELSON

James Nelson, whom we read about last year, as a boy, in an alcohol-soaked scene, beat his mother to death with a brick. He served nine years in prison. And during that time he met Christ at the cross, in deep repentance, and confessed Christ as his Savior and his Lord. He began to study the Bible. He began to be a lay preacher. And last year he was ordained in the Church of Scotland as a Presbyterian minister.

The forgiveness of God! The love of God! The power of the cross to change and to forgive—how wonderful and thrilling!

CHAPTER 7

“WOMAN, BEHOLD THY SON”

HIS MOTHER AT THE CROSS

And then there is another thing that He did at the cross that is one of the most touching things to me in all the world. “Now there stood by the cross His mother.” And He looked to John, one of His disciples, and He said, “John, behold this woman.” And He said to Mary, His mother—He called her “Woman,” just as He did at Cana of Galilee; He called her “Woman” twice—He said, “Woman, behold thy son!” And from that hour on, John, His friend and His disciple, took care of His mother.

THE CURE

There’s a rock group in England called The Cure. Jesus Christ on the cross was the cure for all our severed and ailing human relationships, for all the social problems. The oppressed peoples of the world feel the impact of His death on the cross.

CHAPTER 8

"IT IS FINISHED"

HE CAME TO DIE

And then there was another statement from the cross. He said, "It is finished." It is finished! What did He mean?

In John 17 He had said, "I finished the work that Thou hadst given Me to do." God gave Him a job to do, and the job was to die on the cross. "To this end was I born," He said. He came to die. He's the only man ever born to die. That was why He came.

We wonder why He didn't feed everybody and heal everybody. He could have done it! That would have healed some bodies and fed some people that were hungry. He did that out of compassion. But His real work was the cross.

HEAVEN OR HELL

And that's why the cross is so important, because there you're dealing with eternity. You see, the body is going to go to the grave. But your soul, your spirit—that part of you that lives inside your body—is going to live on and on and on. Where is it going to spend eternity, heaven or hell? It'll be decided by the cross: what you do about the cross. Because from the cross He's asking you to repent of sin and receive Him as Lord and Savior. Yes, it is finished.

CHAPTER 9

“INTO THY HANDS”

NO DEATH RATTLE

And then He said something else. In Luke 23: “And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, He said, Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit.”

Now, I’ve seen a few people die—quite a number of people die. I’ve heard the death rattle in their throats. But there was no death rattle in the throat of Jesus. They did not take His life from Him. He laid it down voluntarily. “And He said in a loud voice”—notice, a loud voice—“I commend My spirit. Into Thy hands, O Lord, I commend My spirit.” He gave up His spirit to God the Father.

THE GIFT OF ETERNAL LIFE

And in saying this, He conferred upon every one of us the possibility of the gift of eternal life. You can have eternal life tonight. And you that are watching by television can pick up that telephone and call that number on your screen, and someone will be there to talk to you about receiving this Christ.

We were lost, confused, without purpose and meaning in life, with no assurance of a future life. And Jesus, from the cross, reached out by His death and rescued us. And we say to Him today, “Lord and Savior!”

Are you sure He’s your Lord and your Savior? Thousands of people go to church, but they’re not sure that they’ve committed their lives to Christ.

CHAPTER 10

TWO THIEVES

THE MOCKING CROWD

And then, lastly, there was the statement that He made to a thief on the cross. The crowds down below were shouting, “If You’re the Son of God, come down and save Yourself!” Others were saying, “He saved others; Himself He cannot save.” They were mocking. They were jeering. They were laughing.

Both of the thieves were criticizing. You see, He was on the cross for six hours. And for the first three hours they were both criticizing Him and making fun of Him, like the crowds down below.

"LORD, REMEMBER ME"

They were both guilty. They both deserved to die according to Roman law. But one of them began to look at Jesus. And he began to see something he’d never seen anywhere else before. He saw that Jesus was different. And he began to say to himself, “He must be the Son of God. He must be Lord.”

And he rebuked the other thief, saying, “Don’t you fear God? We deserve what we’re getting, but He hasn’t done anything wrong.” Then he turned to Jesus, and he said, “Lord”—and that word Lord means “my very own Lord”—“Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” What an act of faith!

And what did Jesus say? “Today you will be with Me in paradise.”

THE FIRST INTO PARADISE

And the angels of heaven were watching to see who would be the first one He would take to paradise. It was a thief that deserved hell. The forgiveness and the mercy of God are so far beyond our comprehension that we can hardly talk about it. Yes, that thief is going to be in heaven, and you're going to see him. Jesus took him by the death of the cross.

Two thieves: which are you? Which cross are you on? The one that's rejecting, or neglecting, or even making fun? Or are you the one that receives and accepts?

CHAPTER 11

THE INVITATION

THREE THINGS

I'm asking you to make your commitment to Christ tonight just as simply. What do you have to do? Three things.

First, you must repent of your sin. That word repent means to change: change your way of living, change your attitude. Now, you cannot do it alone, but God will help you, if you're willing.

The second thing is: by faith receive Christ into your heart—by faith. You cannot come intellectually alone. Man cannot come to God just with his mind. He has to come by faith, like a little child trusting his father or mother.

And then, thirdly, you must be willing to follow Him and serve Him. It's not just receiving Him; it's being a follower of His every hour of the day. You won't become perfect, but you'll change directions in your life. You're going this way, and you're turned by the Spirit of God, and you start a different way.

SO CLOSE TO THE KINGDOM

And I'm going to ask you to do something we've seen hundreds of people do here every night. I'm going to ask you to get up out of your seat and come and stand in front of this platform, and say by coming, "I want to know, when I leave here tonight."

The Bible says, "He that hardeneth his heart, being often reproved, shall suddenly be cut off, and that without remedy." You may never have a moment like this again, when you're so close to the kingdom of God. Come tonight.

You may be a member of the best church in town. You may be a counselor; you may be a choir member; you may be a clergyman. But you're not sure how you stand before God. And you want to come to the cross and find forgiveness of all your sins, and a certainty that if you died tonight you'd go to heaven. You get up and come right now—hundreds of you. Just come straight down and stand here and make that commitment.

IN HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

There are many of you that have been watching by television. We're here in southern New England, in a crusade being held in Hartford, Connecticut. And every night we've seen hundreds of people come and make their commitment to Christ. And you see tonight hundreds more are coming.

You can make that commitment where you are. You may be at home; you may be in a hotel room; you may be in a bar. Wherever you are, pick up the phone and call the number on the screen, and there'll be somebody there to talk to you.

(Cliff Barrows) Again, we'd like to encourage you to make this your moment of decision, and take a few moments to make that telephone call and talk to someone who is ready to talk with you. We have phones all across the country, where people who are standing by are praying that God will speak to you through His Word and through the message tonight. So you make that telephone call. It could well be the most important call you could ever make.

CLOSING WORDS

(Closing Announcement) If you just prayed that prayer with my father, or if you have any questions about a relationship with Jesus Christ, why don't you call the number on the screen. There will be someone there to talk with you, pray with you and answer those questions. And remember, God loves you! If you would like to commit your life to Jesus Christ, please call us right now, toll free at 1-877-772-4559. That's 1-877-772-4559. Or you can write to us at: Billy Graham, 1 Billy Graham Parkway, Department C, Charlotte, NC 28201. Or you can contact us on the web 24/7 at peacewithgod.tv. We'll get the same helps to you that we give to everyone who responds at the invitation.

On behalf of Franklin Graham and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, thank you for watching and thank you for your prayers.

SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

Passages quoted or alluded to in this message, in order of appearance. An asterisk (*) marks a passage the preacher did not name by chapter and verse; the editors identified it.

Hebrews 6:4-6 — Crucifying the Son of God afresh. (Chapter named, verses not.) *(Chapter 2)*

Revelation 13:8; 1 Peter 1:19-20* — Slain from the foundation of the world. *(Chapter 2)*

Romans 3:23* — All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. *(Chapter 2)*

Ephesians 3:18-19* — Breadth, length, depth and height; the love that passeth knowledge. *(Chapter 3)*

Genesis 6:15* — The length of the ark. *(Chapter 3)*

1 Kings 6:2* — The length of Solomon's temple: sixty cubits. *(Chapter 3)*

John 14:2* — Mansions in heaven. *(Chapter 3)*

Romans 11:33* — "Oh, the depth of the riches." *(Chapter 3)*

John 12:32* — "I, if I be lifted up … will draw all men unto Me." *(Chapter 3)*

Matthew 27:26-29; John 19:34* — The scourging, the crown of thorns and the spear. *(Chapter 4)*

Genesis 22; Psalm 22; Isaiah 53; Leviticus 16 — Prophecies of the cross. (Named by chapter.) *(Chapter 5)*

Psalm 22:1, 3 — "My God, My God"; "But Thou art holy." (Chapter named.) *(Chapter 5)*

Habakkuk 1:13* — God cannot look upon evil. *(Chapter 5)*

2 Corinthians 5:21* — Made to be sin for us who knew no sin. *(Chapter 5)*

John 19:28; Psalm 69:21 — "I thirst." (Psalm named by chapter and verse.) *(Chapter 6)*

Matthew 27:34* — Vinegar mingled with gall. *(Chapter 6)*

Luke 23:34 — "Father, forgive them." (Named by chapter and verse.) *(Chapter 6)*

Matthew 26:53* — Twelve legions of angels. *(Chapter 6)*

Genesis 2:17* — In the day you break My law you will die. *(Chapter 6)*

Matthew 25:41* — Hell was not created for us. *(Chapter 6)*

John 19:25-27* — "Woman, behold thy son." *(Chapter 7)*

John 2:4* — He called her "Woman" at Cana. *(Chapter 7)*

John 19:30* — "It is finished." *(Chapter 8)*

John 17:4 — "I finished the work." (Chapter named, verse not.) *(Chapter 8)*

John 18:37* — "To this end was I born." *(Chapter 8)*

Luke 23:46 — "Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit." (Chapter named, verse not.) *(Chapter 9)*

John 10:18* — He laid down His life voluntarily. *(Chapter 9)*

Romans 6:23* — The gift of eternal life. *(Chapter 9)*

Matthew 27:39-44; Luke 23:39-43* — The mocking crowd and the two thieves. *(Chapter 10)*

Mark 15:25, 34* — Six hours on the cross. *(Chapter 10)*

Matthew 18:3* — Come like a little child. *(Chapter 11)*

Proverbs 29:1* — He that hardeneth his heart shall suddenly be cut off. *(Chapter 11)*

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

William "Billy" F. Graham Jr. (1918–2018) was raised on a dairy farm in Charlotte, North Carolina. In 1934, at age 15, he made a commitment to faith during a revival led by Mordecai Ham. He was ordained in 1939, graduated from Florida Bible Institute in 1940, and earned a B.A. from Wheaton College in 1943, where he married Ruth McCue Bell.

After pastoring in Illinois and serving as the first full-time evangelist for Youth for Christ International, Graham was vaulted into national prominence by the 1949 Los Angeles Crusade. This event launched decades of global outreach, including historic, extended crusades in London (1954), New York City (1957), Seoul (1973), and Rio de Janeiro (1974). Overall, he preached live to nearly 215 million people in over 185 countries and territories.

In 1950, he founded the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA). Through BGEA, Graham hosted the syndicated *Hour of Decision* radio program for over 60 years, published *Decision* magazine, and authored 33 books—including bestsellers such as *Angels: God's Secret Agents* (1975) and his 1997 autobiography, *Just As I Am*.

A counselor to U.S. presidents, Graham appeared on Gallup's "Ten Most Admired Men in the World" list a record 61 times. His honors include the Presidential Medal of Freedom (1983), Congressional Gold Medal (1996), and an Honorary Knighthood (2001). Following his passing in 2018 at age 99, he lay in honor in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda, and a bronze statue of him was added to the U.S. Capitol in 2024. Billy and Ruth raised five children, 19 grandchildren, 44 great-grandchildren, and nine great-great-grandchildren.

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- **Social Media Managers:** Share books online, grow our reach, and engage our global community.
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