

**The Scandalous Cross**  
 Spilman Memorial Baptist Church, Kinston NC  
 Dr. H. Powell Dew, Jr.  
 March 17, 2024

Text: Deuteronomy 21: 18-23, Luke 23:26-49

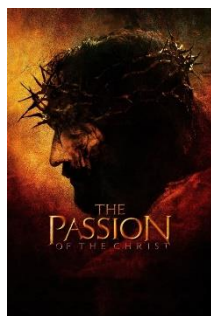
Purpose: God so loved the world that He gave His Son – on a cross – a cross of scandal to redeem the world. He willingly sent His Beloved to reconcile us to Himself. We can now live our life with freedom in Christ – forgiveness of sin, a connection to God – through the abiding Holy Spirit, an assurance that God loves us, and live with confidence knowing we have everlasting life.

A new hair salon opened up for business right across the street from the old established barber.



They put up a big bold sign which read:  
 "WE GIVE SEVEN DOLLAR HAIR CUTS!"

Not to be outdone, the old Master Barber put up his own sign: "WE FIX SEVEN DOLLAR HAIR CUTS!"<sup>1</sup>

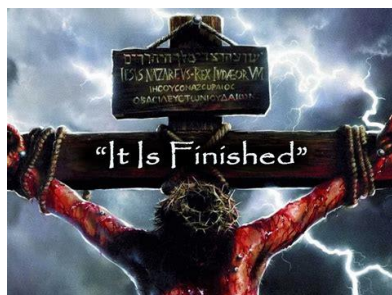


About fifteen years ago, a movie by the name *The Passion of the Christ* came out produced by Mel Gibson. When the movie came out, I purchased an early release of the movie and we opened the church for its showing. It was widely promoted and wildly successful in its release. As many as 3,000 movie theatres across America featured the last 24 hours of Jesus' life – Jesus' time in the Garden of Gethsemane, His betrayal at the hands of Judas, the trials, the mocking, the three denials of Peter, the beatings endured by Jesus, the harshness of and brutality poured out on Jesus' body, the Via Dolorosa, crucifixion between two thieves, His last words upon the cross, the darkened skies, and finally His death and burial. The closing scene in the movie is Jesus' resurrection. The movie ends there.

Of all the movies I have seen, this has got to be one that touched a place in my heart and soul like none other. As they were beating Jesus, I could not watch. As they nailed him to the cross, I looked away. As they tortured Him, I cried inside. Isaiah 53, which we looked at Wednesday night, says in verse 3, *“He is despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.”* Isaiah 52:12 says, *“So His visage was marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men.”*



Watching a visual portrayal of Jesus’ death on the cross was more than my mind could receive and I simply had to turn away. Who is this man that Isaiah speaks about? Who is this man that died upon a cross so many years ago? Why did this man go to the cross?



It was none other than God’s one and only son hanging on a wooden cross. How scandalous! It is the Son of God suspended between heaven and earth reconciling the world back to God. He died so we would be reconciled back to God.

## A. THE CURSE OF THE CROSS<sup>2</sup>

To help us understand why there is such a reaction of revulsion for some and not something of beauty, let us go back to the scripture verse I read earlier in Deuteronomy. There are actually two separate issues found in our reading of Deuteronomy 21:18-23. The first has to do with a Rebellious Son. The last two verses have to do with leaving a body hanging on a tree.



**“If any man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or his mother, and when they chastise him, he will not even listen to them,  
— Deuteronomy 21:18 (NASB)”**

*“If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and who, when they have chastened him, will not heed them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city, to the gate of his city. And they shall say to the elders of his city, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.’ Then all the men of*

*his city shall stone him to death with stones; so you shall put away the evil from among you, and all Israel shall hear and fear.”*



I know growing up I heard several people say (tongue in cheek) that is what we need to do today with our rebellious, stubborn children. I don't think that would go over too well today.

The point I believe God was making was that rebellion against parents and their leadership in the family unit should not be tolerated. When the children are in charge, the family is in trouble. When the family is in trouble, the community is in trouble. This was so serious that God allowed repeated rebellion to be dealt with severely – to the point of death!

But aren't we all rebellious children? Aren't we all deserving of death?

The second point in Deuteronomy 21:22-23 goes on to say,

*“If a man has committed a sin deserving of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day, so that you do not defile the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance; for he who is hanged is accursed of God.”*



22 “And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, 23 his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day,

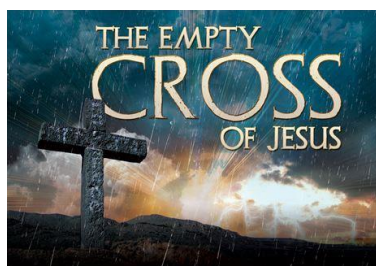
for a hanged man is **CURSED** by God. (Dt 21.22-23)

This passage of scripture was written by Moses for the people of Israel. That is why there is such a strong reaction to the idea that Jesus would die in the manner in which he did. Even from God's perspective, Jesus' death on the cross is not a thing of beauty rather it is a thing of utter revulsion and desecration. For it is written in the Scriptures *“anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse.”* Jesus was hung on a tree, that wooden cross of punishment, dying a criminal's death and all it says is “shame” “guilt” “pain” and mostly it says “failure.” To deserve a death that gruesome, one has to commit a capital offense. It is not beautiful, it is not lovely, certainly deserving of an “R” rating. It is an ugly thing, a scandalous thing, which a holy God cannot bear to see.

It is a horrifying image, to be hung upon a tree in the manner in which Jesus died. It does not

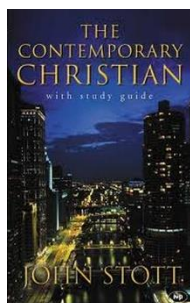


surprise me at all that Jesus' hanging on the cross is such a taboo thing to anyone brought up as a Jew. Hanging on a tree – that's desecration, that's a cursed thing, a thing of horror that the Romans fashioned and used to quiet down any thoughts of revolting against them. The Bible doesn't sugar coat the ugliness of the cross. The Bible does not try to hide the scandal of being hung on a cross. Christianity has never sought to cover this scandal up.



Writing in 1984, long before Gibson's movie was even an idea, Michael Green<sup>3</sup> in his book *The Empty Cross of Jesus* remarked, "What an astonishing way for a religion to start –founded on a cross! Imagine the incongruity these days of starting a religious movement based on a hangman's noose." Isn't that right? Undeniably

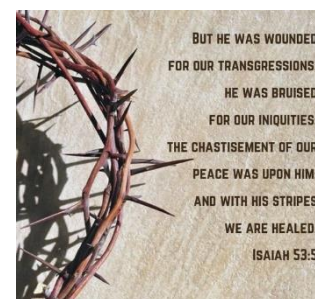
astonishing, what a crazy way to introduce people to faith in God, through an instrument of bloody torture and death. Who would think to start off this way? No wonder some laugh. No wonder some see it as sickening senseless violence. No wonder some see it as dividing rather than unifying. For the smell of death just lingers over it."



John Stott<sup>4</sup> a well-known writer said in *The Contemporary Christian* observed long before the *Passion of the Christ* movie: "To the unbelieving Jew it was INCONCEIVABLE that the Messiah should die 'on a tree', that is, under the curse of God. To the unbelieving Gentile it was LUDICROUS to suppose that a god, one of the immortals, should die." The mangled body of a crucified man as the source of inspiration? Ludicrous? It seems so. Again, no wonder some laughed, no wonder some cursed it, no wonder it is not fully embraced by all. It is indeed a cursed thing for Jesus to die upon the cross. It still has that same effect today!

## B. THE CURSE THAT BECAME A BLESSING

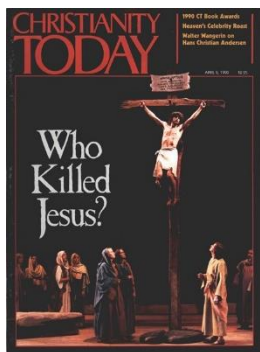
To put a biblical perspective on this whole cursed thing, we need to get back to why this all happened. You see, it was God's will. Here we have a God who cannot bear the thought of sin. His glory is diminished if He allowed sin into heaven. He cannot allow it. His glory, His Holiness, removes every hint of darkness. His justice demands that sin must be punished, just as much as our own brand of justice cries out for vengeance every time someone violently assaults, kills, or rapes an innocent victim.



In the movies, every time a hero destroys the enemy, we applaud. Good must win over evil! Similarly, God stands firmly in His glory. Evil and sin must be defeated for the glory of God demands it! He does not want it to be diminished; His glory cannot be a flawed glory. The Bible also tells us that God is jealous for the glory of His name. Yet God still loves the person that speaks blasphemy against Him. God still loves those that despise Him. While we are still bound by sin and glorying in our sin, God still loves us.

Through the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, we hear these words:

*Surely He has borne our grief's, And carried our sorrows;  
Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted.  
But He was wounded for our transgressions,  
He was bruised for our iniquities;  
The chastisement of our peace was upon Him,  
And by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray;  
We have turned, every one, to his own way;  
And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4-6)*



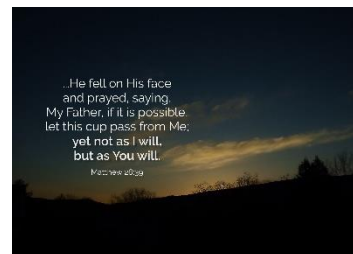
Throughout the centuries since the death of Jesus on the cross, millions have asked the question, “Who is it that killed Jesus?”

During WWII in Germany, the cry of Hitler was, “It was the Jews that killed Jesus.” So much hatred towards the Jews from Christian circles through the centuries have centered on this accusation. But the truth is the Jews were not the ones that crucified Jesus.

The Bible gives us the answer. Isaiah 53:10 says,

*“Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief.  
When You make His soul an offering for sin,  
He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days,  
And the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in His hand.”*

It was the Lord Himself who offered up His son as atonement for sin. The Lord laid on Jesus Christ the iniquity of us all. The Jews did not do that, it was the Lord’s doing.

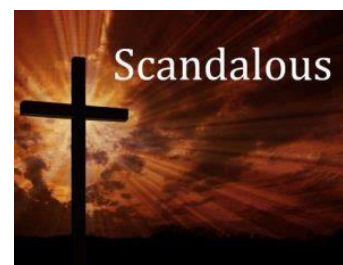


The scripture says it was the Lord that bruised Him – not the Jews – not the Roman guards. They may have played a part in God’s master plan, they may have given Him over to the Roman government, the Roman soldiers may have carried out the execution, but it was God that laid this chastisement upon Jesus. It was Jesus that willingly received it on our behalf. No one took His life, He willingly laid it down.

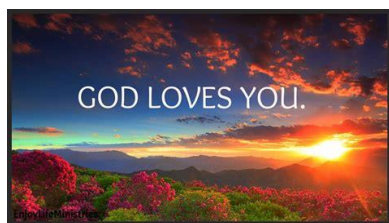


Charles Colson in his breakpoint article on Feb.12, 2004, had a good grasp of this issue when he said: "The Jews didn't cause the death of Jesus, nor did the Romans. They were merely instruments carrying out what God had decreed. He sent His only begotten Son to die on the cross so that the sins of mankind might be forgiven. And those who take Scripture seriously have always known who killed Jesus: **You and I and all other sinful human beings did so.**"

That scandalous cross was no surprise to Jesus. It did not catch God the Father by surprise. God set it up for a purpose. It was a sovereign choice of His to turn what is blatantly evil, that is the death of an innocent man, Jesus, into something good.

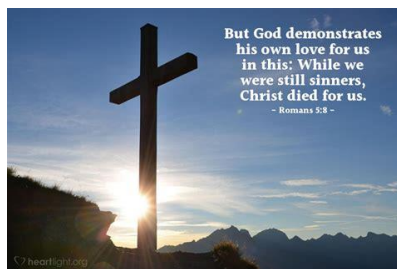


It is through the cross, through the Passion of the Christ, we see God resolving the tension of how a holy God can redeem a fallen creation who chose to have nothing to do with Him. **God loves us.** But He cannot allow sin in His presence. As a result, He chose to do this, it was His will. *“just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.”* (Ephesians 1:4-6)



We are justified before God in Christ Jesus. It is His death on the cross that justifies us.

This is important for us all to grasp. God made a choice, and it was a bloody deadly choice, which eventually resulted in Him maintaining His integrity as a holy and just God, and yet demonstrating the fullness of love for a lost world.



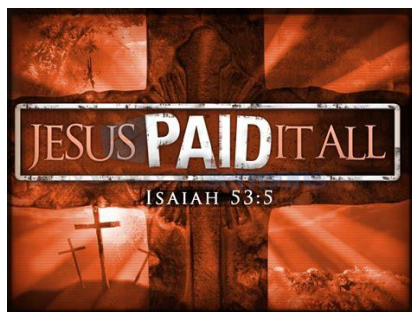
Through Christ's death, which God purposely planned for and made happen, people all over the world can have a hope for a new beginning, a fresh start. The suffering of God's Son is a statement from heaven of how much God wants us to live eternally with Him in a holy heaven – even when sin appears dominant in our world, crushing the people He loves. The sickness of our sin cannot match the agony of God, when He offered the Son He loved to die for us. God cannot act as if there is no such thing as sin.



As John Piper<sup>5</sup> noted, “It cannot simply be swept under the rug of the universe, as though nothing awesome were at stake. The judge of the earth will do right (Genesis 18:25). He will judge the world in righteousness (Psalm 9:8).” So he made the choice, the choice to love, to redeem rather than have us lost without a shred of hope. Jesus died, to guarantee that heaven is accessible to all who have faith in Him.

## C. WHAT THE SCANDALOUS CROSS IS SAYING

### 1. THE CROSS SAYS GOD WILL DO WHAT IT TAKES TO LOVE



You and I are no longer something to be discarded like yesterday's newspaper. God knows how we really are. He knows the result of sin. He understands we often prefer the sin instead of turning to God. But he died for us anyway. Isaiah 53 tells us more about ourselves than we care to admit. *“All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity*

*of us all.”* (Isaiah 53:6)

It is as if we have fallen into a pit and we cannot get out. What can a loving and holy God do?

Here's an illustration:

One day .... A man fell into a pit and couldn't get himself out.



A subjective person came along and said, "I feel for you down there."

An objective person walked by and said, "It's logical that someone would fall down there."

A Pharisee said, "Only bad people fall into pits."

A mathematician calculated how deep the pit was.

A news reporter wanted the exclusive story on the pit.

An IRS agent asked if he was paying taxes on the pit.

A self-pitying person said, "You haven't seen anything until you've seen my pit."

A fire-and-brimstone preacher said, "You deserve your pit."

A Christian Scientist observed, "The pit is just in your mind."

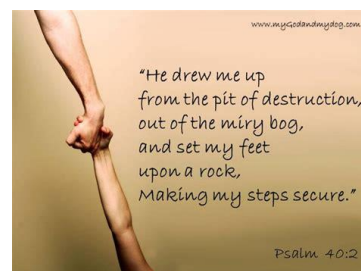
A psychologist noted, "Your mother and father are to blame for your being in that pit."

A self-esteem therapist said, "Believe in yourself and you can get out of that pit."

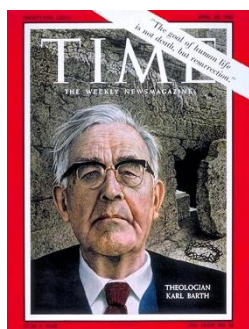
An optimist said, "Things could be worse."

A pessimist claimed, "Things will get worse."

But "Jesus, seeing the man, took him by the hand and lifted him out of the pit."



I think this is exactly what Jesus did on the cross. He did not just theorize, moralize, condemn, give us tips on how to get ourselves out of the pit, report it like some neutral news reporter, or empathize with our condition. Jesus saw us drowning in sin and took us by His own hand, by His sacrifice on that cursed scandalous tree, and lifted us out of the pit! I am so glad Jesus didn't say, "go figure it out on your own."

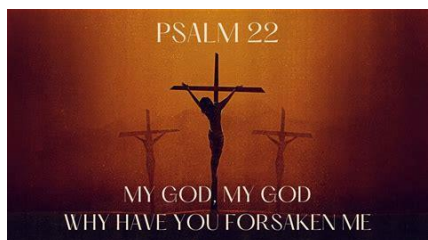


Karl Barth, a famous German theologian, was once asked by a reporter this question, "Dr. Barth, what is the single most important truth you have learned as a theologian?" Barth replied **"The most important thing I have learned is this: 'Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.'"**

The heart of a faith commitment in Christianity is not adherence to a set of rules or a system of belief but at its core is the revelation that God loves us! Jesus loves me this I know! Is the cross a curse or a blessing then to you?

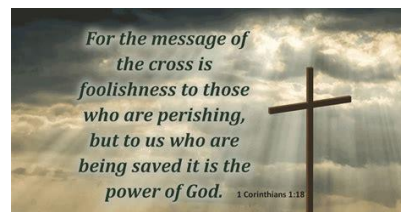


## 2. THE CROSS IS SCANDALOUS!

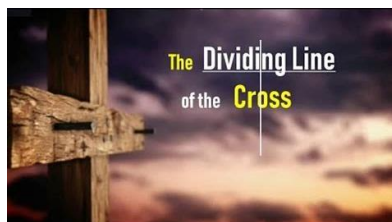


The cross upon which Jesus died was so horrific, even God the Father turned away from His Son. While Jesus was suffering in agony, the worst part was God had turned His back on His Son. Jesus cried out, *“My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”*

This cross of Jesus divides people. I Corinthians says, *“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”* (I Corinthians 1:18) The passion of the Christ remains scandalous. It will divide people. It just confounds people; some will react by laughing it off, just to dismiss it or some will get furious calling it as hate. The Bible understands this and says,



*“For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”* (1 Corinthians 1:22-25)



With this comes the inevitable result - division. The cross forces us to make a decision. Either there is acceptance of the fact Jesus did die on the cross to bring us peace with God or He did not.

The cross forces us to answer to this – did He or did He not die for the sins of the world? Or is God a sadist, who enjoyed the publicly humiliating and painful cross experience?

It is also not surprising then to find that becoming a follower of Jesus will actually divide families instead of uniting them. Jesus said in Matthew 10:32-39,



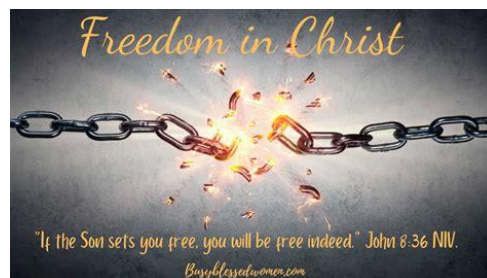
*“Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven. “Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have*

*come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'; and 'a man's enemies will be those of his own household.' He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it."*

Loyalty to Jesus can be dangerous – it can cause great division among our family and friends. But there are blessings found only in the cross of Jesus.

## **D. BENEFITS OF THE CROSS OF CHRIST**

**1. BENEFIT: WE RECEIVE FREEDOM IN CHRIST:** God has already judged sin through Christ so you and I can be free from the guilty verdict of sin.

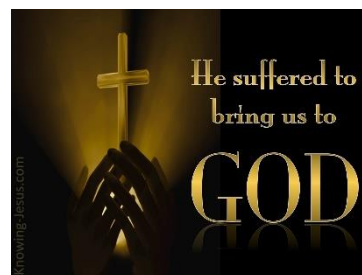


The Bible boldly proclaims, *“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.”* (Galatians 5:1)

My question for you today is this? Do you have this freedom in Christ, or are you continually living under a cloud of doubt and guilt? Are you certain about your forgiveness and freedom in Christ or are you uncertain? Will you trust Jesus to remove that guilt and receive forgiveness of your sins?

Even though we are all sinners and fall short of the glory of God, we can be justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ. (Romans 3:23-24) We can choose to live in our sin – and receive the just reward for our sins – condemnation and death OR we can receive forgiveness and eternal life! Will you trust Jesus to take away your sins?

**2. BENEFIT: CONNECTION TO GOD:** God makes it clear that real spirituality is found through Christ’s death. I Peter 3:18 says, *“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit.”*



It is by the Holy Spirit of God we are able to live connected to God. Jesus said to the disciples in the Upper Room, *“If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and HE will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever – the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.”* (John 14:15-17)

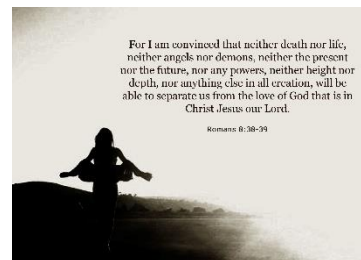
Praise God we are not left as orphans – we have a comforter, the Holy Spirit.

### **3. BENEFIT: ASSURANCE THAT GOD LOVES**

**ME:** Because of Jesus’ death on the cross, we don’t need to live in uncertainty about God’s love or plans for us.

I John 4:9 says, *“In this the Love of God was manifested towards us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him.”*

God’s Son dying on that cross says it loud and clear – **GOD LOVES YOU.**

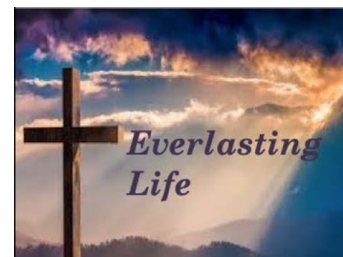


Will you receive the Love of God by receiving His Son?

### **4. BENEFIT: CONFIDENCE IN LIFE**

**EVERLASTING:** Through Christ, our fears, doubts and superstitions can be stripped away.

Maybe there are some here that are terrified about the unknown. Maybe you have been struggling with the question, “Is there life after death?”



Jesus told us there is!

*“Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many mansions, if it were not so, I would have told you. I go and prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.”* (John 14:1-3)

Do you have this confidence in life and in death? When you trust Jesus Christ, you can live confidently for today – and eternity!

**LET US PRAY**

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Micky's Funnies, A Barber Funny, 11/7/2023

<sup>2</sup> Sermon based on Sermon by Andrew Chan, The Scandalous Cross: A Curse or a Blessing

<sup>3</sup> 1984, p.25

<sup>4</sup> 1992, p.62

<sup>5</sup> The Pleasures of God, 1991, p.165

**Preached at Fremont Missionary Baptist Church, Fremont NC  
March 17, 2013**

**Preached at Spilman Memorial Baptist Church, Kinston NC  
March 17, 2024**