

“THE CROSS”
by Rom A. Pegram (5/28/17)

I don't know if some of you have ever thought about this or not, but even the Christian faith was born out of uncertainty, darkness, and despair. I'm talking about the CROSS of Christ. As Jurgen Moltmann describes it: “Our faith begins at the point where atheists suppose that it must be at the end. Our faith begins with the bleakness and power which is the night of the cross, abandonment, temptation, and doubt about everything that exists!”

Do you see what he's getting at here? For the past several weeks, we've been in a worship series called Plan B; we've looked at several different examples of when life seems to come at us in ways we didn't expect ... and God doesn't show up in our circumstances the way we thought he would. But folks, the Christian faith itself was born—again—out of uncertainty, darkness, and despair. And it's out of this seeming tragedy of the cross, the ultimate Plan B, that something amazing and transformational is born. *That's what the cross tells us* ... and it tells us even more. It tells us something important about ourselves and our Plan B situations, too; let me begin with this...

When our kids were young, it was very unusual that Jane would take an evening off and leave the kids with me. But, it did happen ... occasionally. Quite frankly, when they were *real young*, they pretty much scared me ... and I think that's why Jane didn't leave me with them too often. She would always leave me a set of instructions, however, which brought me great comfort. She told me things like what they could have to snack on, when their bedtime was, etc.

On occasion, the kids would do their best to push my buttons. I would follow Jane's instructions explicitly ... and apparently that was a problem for my kids. She told me how many snacks they could have ... and that's what I gave them—no more. But, have you ever tried to cut a kid off from their favorite snack? Sometimes, they would kick and scream when snack time was over ... and usually what they'd do is cry out for their mom. “I want my mommy!” (Some of you dads have heard that before, I'm sure...) And I remember those times when I was thinking to *myself* ... “Yes ... and I want your mommy, too!” Over and over again, they would scream...

I learned to not take their screaming for their mom personally, though. You know why? Because I finally figured out ... they didn't really want their mommy; *they wanted what they thought their mommy would give them...*

Now, let's do a freeze-frame here and pause for a second. Can we be real with each other? At the risk of losing your attention right now—at the beginning of this message, I want to share something with you that you just might need to hear: *You might be at odds with God about something right now, you may not be happy with the way your life is turning out, and you may be in the midst of praying and pleading with God about something!* But, my question is this: ***Is it God you really want ... or do you just want what you think God might be able to give you?*** One of the things God's been teaching me in life is that *at times I want my dreams more than I actually want God!* And

maybe that's why our Bible story for today resonates with me so much. Let me share it with you now ... and then I'll explain more (Exodus 33:1-6, NLT):

¹ The LORD said to Moses, "Get going, you and the people you brought up from the land of Egypt. Go up to the land I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I told them, 'I will give this land to your descendants.' ² And I will send an angel before you to drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. ³ Go up to this land that flows with milk and honey. But I will not travel among you, for you are a stubborn and rebellious people. If I did, I would surely destroy you along the way." ⁴

When the people heard these stern words, they went into mourning and stopped wearing their jewelry and fine clothes. ⁵ For the LORD had told Moses to tell them, "You are a stubborn and rebellious people. If I were to travel with you for even a moment, I would destroy you. Remove your jewelry and fine clothes while I decide what to do with you." ⁶ So from the time they left Mount Sinai, the Israelites wore no more jewelry or fine clothes.

Did you understand what just took place here? God promises Moses success in battle—success in claiming the Promised Land for his people. This is what Moses has wanted all along, isn't it? This is the dream he's been pursuing ever since God helped free his people from Egyptian slavery... However, *Moses responds to God in an amazing way* (Exodus 33:12-17, NLT):

¹² One day Moses said to the LORD, "You have been telling me, 'Take these people up to the Promised Land.' But you haven't told me whom you will send with me. You have told me, 'I know you by name, and I look favorably on you.' ¹³ If it is true that you look favorably on me, let me know your ways so I may understand you more fully and continue to enjoy your favor. And remember that this nation is your very own people." ¹⁴

The LORD replied, "I will personally go with you, Moses, and I will give you rest—everything will be fine for you." ¹⁵ Then Moses said, "If you don't personally go with us, don't make us leave this place. ¹⁶ How will anyone know that you look favorably on me—on me and on your people—if you don't go with us? For your presence among us sets your people and me apart from all other people on the earth." ¹⁷ The LORD replied to Moses, "I will indeed do what you have asked, for I look favorably on you, and I know you by name."

I absolutely love this!!!! Moses is basically saying here, 'God, success is not enough for me. I want YOU! I want your presence. I don't just want what you can give me. I want YOU!' ... In my own life, I still strive to get to that place where I believe this truth to the very core of my being. I want to get to the point in my life where I can honestly say: "If God doesn't give me one more thing in this life, I still owe him everything!" *Are you there today ... in the midst of your Plan B situation?*

Folks, there's still a lot I don't know about Plan Bs in life, but here's what I do know: *Being a Christian doesn't exempt us from the fact that Plan Bs may enter into our lives too!* Now, please don't get me wrong; I'm not saying that being a Christian doesn't make

a difference in our lives; I'm just saying that Christianity cannot always be reduced to simple answers (like some theology on bumper stickers, t-shirts, or bracelets)...

I don't believe that anyone understood the complexities or the confusion of our lives here in this world any better than Jesus did! As a matter of fact, in John 16, Jesus lets us know just how much he understands our life in this world ... and *it's in that scripture we learn this...*

JESUS gives us two realities we NEED to make sense of our Plan Bs! First: There is a God who is BIG and POWERFUL and who LOVES us!

I want to give you some background for Jesus' words here at the end of John 16. Jesus is about to be crucified. He's headed for the cross. He is carrying the sins of the world on his shoulders ... and he is going to cross so that through his substitutionary death, we can experience forgiveness and be freed from the sin we're born into in this world. In other words, he's getting ready to pay a penalty that was really ours to pay ... and he says this to his disciples (John 16:33, NLT): "I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."

'Anyone interested in this peace Jesus offers? Notice he says, "...you may have peace *in me*." Those words 'in me' are so important! Jesus doesn't say that you'll have peace because of what I can give you; he doesn't even say that you'll have peace because you belong to a Church. He clearly says, 'in me.' When you immerse your current reality into his reality ... *that is where you'll find peace*. Again, it's not so much about what God can give you; peace is found in a relationship with Jesus himself...

Folks, God loved us enough to send us the very SOURCE OF PEACE... Again, *there is a God who is BIG and POWERFUL and who LOVES us!* And, it's a good thing, because after telling us that peace is found in him, he reminds us why this peace is so important: Here's the second reality we need to know...

We live in a world that seems to be FALLING APART! Verse 33 of John 16 tells us, "...Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows..." It's as if Jesus is saying, "You're really going to need peace because trouble is coming." And this is not the 'I locked myself out of the house' kind of trouble; this is the kind of 'I don't know if there is a God' kind of trouble—*the kind that rocks you to the very core...*

I can almost picture Jesus in this verse 33 of John 16 as a meteorologist, forecasting the weather ... and giving us a 7-day outlook: "It's trouble, trouble, trouble, trouble, trouble, trouble, and ... trouble."

In short, *the forecast for life on earth is ... trouble*. And this is true because of these *two overlapping realities* Jesus tells us about:

- *There is a God who is big and powerful and loves us...*
- *... and we live in a world that seems to be falling apart.*

“...But take heart, because I have overcome the world,” Jesus says at the end of v. 33. In other words, don’t lose sight of the BIG PICTURE, no matter what you’re going through right now... Folks, here’s the GOOD NEWS for today (Point II):

The CROSS gives us one reality that is ESSENTIAL (God’s unending love)!

Understanding and grasping God’s unending love is essential in the midst of any Plan B. It’s essential because, in our humanness, it is way too easy to think: *God must NOT love me if he’s letting me go through this. God must have abandoned me or I wouldn’t be feeling this way.*

If we simply focus on circumstances and if we define God through those circumstances ... that conclusion may seem to make sense. But, when we get our eyes on the CROSS, we are reminded that there are no limits to what God will do to draw us close to him—even the giving of his one and only Son, that we might be able to live in peace with him... Don’t ever forget the LOVE of the CROSS! That’s where God needs to be defined in our lives—not out of our circumstances. Here’re a couple of final comments to help you through your Plan Bs in life, in light of the CROSS...

Don’t ever let IDOLS take the place of the CROSS! Folks, God loves us and that *should* supersede whatever Plan B situation we’re going through ... *BUT*, the trouble is, we don’t always think that way! We’re sometimes tempted in the midst of our Plan Bs *to take our eyes off of the CROSS* and look for other ways of coping with the pain of our Plan B situations—things like the practice of idolatry...

My favorite definition of idolatry is this: *to take something other than God and make it our primary focus in life!* So, what’s your primary focus today? If it’s not God, our Heavenly Father, you might be in trouble. Pastor Louie Giglio says we can find our idols in life by following ‘the trails of our life’—things like:

- Our time...
- Our affections...
- Our energy...
- Our money...
- Our allegiance...

Follow the trails of your life; at the end of the trail, you’ll find a throne; and whatever or whomever is on that throne is what’s of highest value to you—what you really worship. What I’m telling you today is this: *Don’t let anything take the place of the CROSS in your life ... especially when going through Plan Bs!* Don’t ever forget the LOVE of the CROSS... Here’s one more thing for consideration:

It’s possible the reason we feel so SHATTERED and BROKEN in the midst of our Plan Bs, at times, is because *our love and devotion are MISGUIDED!* It’s possible, in other words, that part of the reason we feel the way we do in the midst of our Plan Bs is that we’ve given our love and devotion to OUR DREAMS and OUR PLANS ... *instead of God...* It’s something to keep in mind as a possibility, for no matter how worthy or

compelling or good a personal plan might be—*it makes a pretty worthless god ... especially in light of eternity...*

Folks, I can't help but think of Jesus' final words of his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before his arrest. *And it's these words, folks, that we need to learn to say and believe to our core.* He asked God, if it would be possible, to take the suffering that he was about to go through away from him. But then he prayed (Matt. 26:39c, NLT): "...Yet I want your will to be done, not mine." *Jesus refused to let his will, his dreams, and his expectations ... become his idols.* We too must be willing to abandon what we've planned and dreamed of, if need be, in order to receive the life God has authored for us. We must keep our eyes on the CROSS. God loves us—that's the message of the CROSS that changes everything. *Absolutely everything...*