

Well, welcome to our morning service, April, the 5<sup>th</sup> 2020. This is the third time that we've met in this way. Today we're going to begin to look at the message of the cross and next Sunday, we're going to look at the message of the resurrection. This is Easter week. and it's a time for us as Christians to celebrate the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ, over sin and death and hell. We've been able to sing together and now we're going to pray before we read the scriptures. Shall we bow in a word of prayer.

*“Eternal and everlasting Father, we thank you that in the name of Jesus, and through his merits, we come into your very presence. We thank you that you are a merciful God, Lord, we do not deserve the least of your mercies. Lord, we do not deserve to gather up the crumbs under your table. Lord Father we thank you for your mercies that are higher than the heavens. And because of your mercies, we are not consumed. Lord, we thank you that we can come into your presence, because of your kindness in the Lord Jesus, We pray that this hour of worship might be a precious time to pray to speak to our hearts. We pray heavenly Father that you would indeed convert souls through this word. We pray that people who have not yet come to the foot of the cross and confess their sin would even this day, turn to the Lord Jesus in repentance. Father, we thank you that You are with us in this crisis. We thank you that we can stare death in the face with confidence because Jesus is our Saviour, and has conquered death itself. We pray heavenly Father that you will be merciful to the nations at this time we realise that you are shaking the nations. O Father in heaven, in wrath would you remember mercy, and humble us as your people. Father we pray that we might be a people that pray and a people of praise. So be with us. Now we ask all this through Jesus’s precious name. Amen”.*

Would you open your Bible, please with me to Psalm, 103, we're going to read the first 12 verses of Psalm 103. And then we're going to read just one verse from John's Gospel. So let's open up Bibles and read Psalm 103 beginning to read the verse one. The psalmist says this.

Bless the LORD, O my soul;  
And all that is within me, *bless* His holy name!  
<sup>2</sup> Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
And forget not all His benefits:  
<sup>3</sup> Who forgives all your iniquities,  
Who heals all your diseases,  
<sup>4</sup> Who redeems your life from destruction,  
Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies,  
<sup>5</sup> Who satisfies your mouth with good *things*,  
*So that* your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.  
<sup>6</sup> The LORD executes righteousness  
And justice for all who are oppressed.  
<sup>7</sup> He made known His ways to Moses,  
His acts to the children of Israel.  
<sup>8</sup> The LORD *is* merciful and gracious,  
Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy.  
<sup>9</sup> He will not always strive *with us*,  
Nor will He keep *His anger* forever.  
<sup>10</sup> He has not dealt with us according to our sins,  
Nor punished us according to our iniquities.

<sup>11</sup> For as the heavens are high above the earth,  
So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him;  
<sup>12</sup> As far as the east is from the west,  
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.

May God add a blessing to the reading of His word. So we turn now to John's Gospel chapter 15, verse, 13, the Gospel of John chapter 15 reading verse 13. Some of you will know this verse off by heart. Many people who aren't followers of the Lord Jesus Christ have heard this verse at a war memorial service or a funeral. It is John 15 verse 13.

**Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. (x2)**

Brothers and sisters, as we come to this text this morning we remind ourselves that the centre of Christianity is the cross of Christ and His glorious resurrection after three days. Without the cross, and without the resurrection, there is no Christianity. Now when Jesus uttered these words, it was the night of his betrayal. It was the eve of the crucifixion, He was with his followers. The 12 were with him and having loved them. He loved them to the end. He showed the full extent of His love. His love has no limits and if there is a limit to the capacity of the love of God, well it is seen only at the cross. For there the fullness of His love was shown. He loved them that much, to die upon a cruel cross for them.

Now Jesus had been teaching throughout his ministry that he was going to give his life for many. He was going to give that life as a ransom or payment for the sins of many. In John chapter six verse 51, he says this, *"I am the living bread."* He's the one that can satisfy your soul. *"I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, He will live forever."* And then he said, *"the bread that I should give is my flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world."* Jesus spoke very plainly to His disciples. *"I will give my flesh. I will give my body."* This was in order that this dead and sinful world might have life. Then in John chapter 10 gives these very famous words in verse eleven. *"I am the good shepherd. The good Shepherd gives his life for the sheep."* That's a wonderful truth isn't it? We are like sheep we've gone astray. We are lost, we wander away from God and we go our own ways, we are sinners. We fall short of the glory of God. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, He goes after us to find us. And the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. Jesus said this, *"I lay down my life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself."* This is the message of Christianity, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, came to shed His precious blood upon the cross that we might have everlasting life. Maybe you're confused as to how this might be, and as we go on in this message we'll explain exactly what that means. **"Greater love has no man has no person has no one than this -to lay down one's life for one's friends."** Jesus loved his disciples, they had become his friends. He was going to give his life for them.

Now at the moment we're in a state of self- preservation. The government has rightly told us to stay in our homes, to do as little shopping as possible, to go out a maximum of once a day, if you are fit and able. We're in isolation, with self-distancing, because of this terrible Corona virus. You know the danger of such a time as this; is that we become preoccupied with number one, with me with my self-preservation. We do understand that what we're doing is not only good for ourselves, but it's good for others. But there's a great danger that we begin to think of self. For example, it's right that we stock up. That's a wise thing. You don't want to shop continually. But I wonder if we overbuy? There may be some with very large freezers, and it means those NHS workers or emergency workers or some of the people who find difficulty getting to the shops, often lack. And then there's the matter of booking online food. Well, you can do a click and collect from Tesco's or Sainsbury's or Asda. But you know if you book online for delivery when you're fit and healthy and you have a car. Have you thought that you just might be taking away from the elderly and vulnerable, their opportunity to receive food in that way? You see, we're in a situation of self -preservation. We understand that, but we have to be careful that we do not become selfish in that.

Now our text tells us to be selfless. It reminds us the Lord Jesus Christ has such love that He gave His life for His friends. You might say well, that was the Lord Jesus. But you know in 1 John chapter 3 we're reminded that if He did that, we also ought to be prepared to give our lives for others. And that means a

selfless life. Now Martin Luther in 1527, when he was ministering in the city of Wittenberg and there was the bubonic plague. (Remember it was a terrible plague, which had been raging for 200 years and at times it raged fiercely). In the end, over 30% of the population in Europe died. He said this, "I will take wise precautions. I shall ask God to mercifully protect us. I shall fumigate. I shall purify the air, I will administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid persons and places where my presence is not needed, in order to not become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others and so cause their death by my negligence." See Martin Luther, though he was a man of faith, a man who trusted in God. He did not test God. He was concerned, not only to preserve his own life but the life of others.

We are astonished, when we find people who are self-sacrificial to the point that they're willing to give their life for others. Have you heard the story of that Roman Catholic priest in Italy? A 75 year old man on a ventilator and he gave his ventilator away to a younger person. He asked the doctors and nurses to pass it on to somebody who he felt was younger, and so was more needy of it, and as a result he died. He gave his life that another person might live. But you know, we know we are not naturally like that. Jesus Christ is the only truly selfless one. He came from heaven, from the glory of heaven. He left that wonderful, perfect communion with his Father, that place of joy where all the angels were worshipping Him. He faced the rejection and the scorn of men, He entered into a limited body, which was subject to all the limitations of our humanity. He knew pain, weariness and eventually death. The Lord Jesus Christ gave up that. And upon the cross, in one sense, you could say, for a moment, for a time He gave up even that perfect communion with his Father, as his Father, turned his back upon his son as he was bearing, our sin, in His body, and was judged for us. The Lord Jesus came to save us from our sins, to save us from hell and destruction and eternal despair. His is unfathomable, eternal and unimaginable love. "Greater love has no man than this- that this One should lay down his life for his friends."

Now we're talking about self-preservation to start with as we consider this text. We will go on to speak solely and wholly about the cross. But I wonder what you feel about a man called Lord Craven who lived in the 17th century. The plague had hit London. And so he felt that the wisest thing to do was to go to the countryside. He was a wealthy man and he had a home in London, and he was able to go to a place in the countryside. When he was packing his bags and entering the carriage of the coach that that he was to travel in., one of his servants said to another, "I suppose my lord is quitting London to avoid the plague. So his God must live in the country, and not in the town." Do you see what the servant was saying? This man's God is only in a good place, the comfortable place. This man's God is no good when there is a plague. Well, Lord Craven was disturbed by this. He reflected on his situation. He got down from the coach. unpacked his bags and started a loving ministry, helping those who were suffering from the plague. Well I wonder whether we need to self-reflect at times. I'm not saying in any sense that we should be breaking the government's guidelines, but at this time, it's not just about me and my safety. It's about prayer. It's about seeking God. It's about doing good to others, phoning them, sending them something, asking in what ways we can help and seeking their eternal good, their soul's salvation. By this we know love, that He laid down his life for us, and brethren, we ought to lay down our lives for one another. Martin Luther, whilst he was in the midst of the bubonic plague in 1527, in particular, we've already said that he would preserve his own life, and take precautions. But he recognised that public servants, the constables and others in positions of authority and medics should stay in London. And then he charged his fellow ministers saying that if they were truly to love their neighbours then they ought to stay also to minister for their sake. He said this, "If my neighbour needs me. I shall not avoid place or person, but shall freely go." Now that is the spirit of the gospel. If Christ loved us so much to die for us, if we are saved then we have an eternal hope of heaven, and that certainty. Surely we as God's servants should be willing to do what the Lord calls us to do. In the coming weeks, we will see more deaths. We will see probably more things that really worry us and trouble us. But as God's people we are to be here for the world, interceding and praying, not just serving ourselves. So my friends, we have thought about self-preservation. The Lord Jesus didn't come to preserve his life. He gave his life for his friends. What will you and I do?

But I want to go to the cross. And this is the heart of the message this morning. So we're going to turn to Romans chapter five. And we're going to look at some verses in Romans Chapter five verses six to eight. These verses speak as to the reason why Christ died. We read this in verse six. "*When we were still without strength, Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man would one die. Yet, perhaps for a*

*good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love towards us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” It was substitutionary death. He died for us. He gave himself for us. He died in our place. There were benefits to what he did for us and we're going to understand that.

But first let's remind ourselves. When was it that he died for us? Was it when we were seeking Him? Was when we were seeking to have a religious life of prayer and good works? Was it when we were being kind to our neighbour? The Bible clearly tells us that there is no one who is good, no not one. We are impotent by nature. We don't seek God, we are lost in our sin. It was when we were lost in our sin, without strength and incapable of bringing ourselves to God. It was in this state and at that time, when Christ died for us. I heard of a very sad situation which was recorded in the state of Indiana, where a couple were told by their doctor to let their new born baby die. It had Down syndrome and had some other complications. And instead of indicating that an operation should take place, and it was actually 90% chance rate of success, he said, your life is going to be miserable. Let that child die. The child wasn't fed and it basically starved to death. That child was helpless. It needed an intervention and it needed love. You know, in the same way, that's what we are like as human beings before God. We're hopeless and helpless. We cannot save ourselves from our sins, our sins condemn us before a holy and a just God and we will face God on the Day of Judgement. We're helpless. But the glorious truth is, we have one who has come to rescue us and to save us. The book of Ezekiel chapter 16 Jerusalem is described in this way. Sadly Jerusalem had gone after idols. And the Lord says, your mother is really an Amorite and a Hittite. You are not of my family the Lord is saying. And Jerusalem is described as a new born baby. It was left out in the cold, in an open field unclothed unwashed in its own blood. Jerusalem is hopeless. And yet the Lord comes to her in that state. Isn't that an apt picture of what we're like? We are without strength. We aren't godly. We need cleansing. We're helpless. Yet, Christ has come into this world, in the state in which we find ourselves, to forgive us and to cleanse us, and to reconcile us to God.

Verse 6 not only says, “Whilst we were without strength, Christ died for us.” but “In due time, He died for the ungodly.” What does that mean –ungodly? It means we are not like God. There is great wickedness in our hearts. Many of our thoughts are very unworthy of God. We have a bias towards sin. We are not like God. Yet God promised before time that he would send His Son, a Lamb slain from all eternity. Jesus Christ came into the world and at the hour appointed for Him by God, He died for the ungodly. I want to say to you this morning, what excuse do you have for not coming to the Saviour? You say well I'm not good enough for Him. No, He died for ungodly people. You say this that I need to improve myself. I need to make myself fit for God before he'll receive me. And I say to you, Christ died for the ungodly. Come as you are, come as a sinner. That's why Christ came to you, to cleanse you and wash all your sins away. May the healing streams of Calvary flow into your life and may He wash you and take all your guilt away. There is a lovely hymn which has a line that says this, “*E'er since by faith I saw the stream by flowing wound supply, redeeming love has been my theme, and shall be till I die.*” That is the only hope of a Christian, that Jesus shed his blood for me. His redeeming love There's no greater love than this than that the very Son of God, the spotless Son of God, should redeem me with his own blood. “*For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His loving kindness toward those who fear Him.*” If you come in repentance to God, if you come, fearing him, well the mercy of God is higher than the heavens, His loving kindness is so vast.

Now come with me to verses seven and eight. . “*For scarcely for a righteous man will one die, yet perhaps for a good man somebody would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” Isn't it true that it's very rare for somebody to give their life for another person? It is possible, at times we read about it and it is remarkable. Occasionally, a person will give their life for somebody who is needy. We might do something for someone who is upright kind and good. This is a story of a man who was in a plane. Mr. Williams. It's 1982, the 13th of January and the plane crashes: Mr. Williams and 4 others survive. They're in freezing cold water, clinging on to debris. The helicopter is sent out immediately The helicopter locate this Mr. Williams quickly. It can see his bald head and so puts out a line. He grabs the line that he passes on to the lady beside him and she is winched up to safety. Many of them are badly injured. And then the line goes down again to Mr. Williams, he passes it on to the next person. And the person is winched up, then the third person is much more difficult but he helps with all his might to help and the fourth. Eventually the line comes down for him but this time, the bald headed Mr. Williams cannot be seen. He has gone under. 29 minutes have passed in freezing cold water and

he can't survive. His life for fellow passengers. We will make such sacrifices sometime. During the Second World War some of the Allied troops will give their lives for their fellow comrades soldiers, but would anybody give their life for an enemy, for a Nazi? Can you imagine that? That's unheard of. For a righteous man scarcely, hardly will anyone dare to die, but it may happen, but not for the enemy. But Christ, Christ Jesus, He gives His life for the ungodly, while we were at enmity with God. Well, whilst we're still sinners in our sin, such is the amazing love of God, the unconditional free love for sinners. He came as a rescue to redeem us from the curse of the Lord. He gave himself upon that cross for us. And the pain that our Saviour went through was far greater than any of us will ever know. We feel terrible for people who have coronavirus and are in intensive care units on a ventilator. But we thank God there is chance to survive. Thank God for the doctors and the nurses, we thank God for the oxygen that's been given to these people. But our Lord Jesus Christ. He surrendered to the most cruel form of crucifixion, enduring hours in agony, slowly suffocating. Nobody gave him oxygen, no doctors, alone upon that cross, insults being hurled against him, with people below callous, more concerned about his clothes and throwing dice for his clothes. The Lord Jesus Christ faced the derision also, not only of the religious leaders but of the 2 on the crosses by the side of him. But worst of all was this, that, at that moment, the Lord Jesus Christ, during those hours upon the cross was receiving the penalty for our sins, He bore our sins his own body. He who knew no sin became sin for us, he bore our sins in his body. The sinless perfect Son of God. Why? We might become the righteousness of God and that he might clothe us with that perfect spotless beautiful life, his righteous life. That God might be able to forgive us and cleanse us. That God wouldn't see us in our sin, guilty and condemned. But he would see us, those who believe in Jesus Christ and trust in him and have repented of their sins. He might see us in Christ, clothed in Him, forgiven and redeemed.

This is the message of Easter. Greater love has no man than this. When a man lay down his life for his friends. It was whilst we were yet sinners, that Christ died for us. "*He forgives all your iniquities, He heals all those diseases of sin. He redeems your life from destruction and crowns you with loving kindness and tender mercies,*" such is the abounding love of God in Jesus Christ. We stop there and reflect. Lord how selfish I am. How could I be so concerned about my own self preservation? Oh Lord, grant that I might follow You all my days. If Jesus Christ, the Son of God has done this for me, and has risen from the dead. He is worthy of all my praise and all my adoration.

Friends, Covid 19, is a killer disease. And we ought to be fearful of it. But as Christians whilst we are wise in the way in which we live and the things we do, we need never fear death. And so we need never fear serving God generously. You read through the Bible. You'll see so many people who would fail a risk assessment. So many people who've done things for God that are out of the box, that are sacrificial, that are hard, but they've done it for the Lord. They haven't been concerned about self- preservation O that we would come under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, that we would serve this lovely Saviour, all our days. Remember Spurgeon. Remember how he addressed his fellow ministers; "Now is the time for all you who love souls. You may see men, more alarmed than they already are. (There was a cholera outbreak). You may see things getting worse. But you have the balm of Gilead. When the wound smart, pour it in. You know of him who died to save. Tell them of him. Lift high the cross before their eyes. Tell them, of Calvary." In 1854 and 1866, they were two cholera outbreaks. And instead of going into the countryside Spurgeon ministered to dying people in London. It was very hard, there was much grief much sorrow, much death, but at the same time, exquisite and astonishing joy. He tells of one case when he came to the house of a young lady dying of cholera. She was near the end, but he says in all of her weakness she was praising God, and she was telling all the people around her brothers and sisters, and the family of the glories and wonders of heaven.

You see when you know God. And when you know Jesus Christ, your life changes completely. O that we would be filled with the love of God. O that we would know this Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins that we might live!

**Greater love has no man than this, that one lays down his life for his friends.**

Let us bow in a word of prayer.