

Three Crosses At Calvary

Luke 23:32-43

There is a place in Jerusalem called Calvary. It is on a hill outside the old walls of the city. There are cave-like cuttings in the bank on this hill that, when viewed from a distance, gives the impression of a skull; hence the designation – the place of the skull.

On top of this hill, almost 2000 years ago, an event took place that changed the course of world history. An event that has remained vivid in the mind of the Christian ever since, and it has become the focal point of all we are and all we ever hope to be; it was the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

***DESCRIBE EVENTS LEADING UP TO THE SCRIPTURE.**

***READ LUKE 23:32-43**

The Scripture I just read describes a small part of the activities surrounding Jesus on the day He died. But, when we think of the cross, we generally focus in on the things that happened at Calvary on that day. Perhaps as we study the three crosses we'll better understand what Jesus meant when He said to take up our cross and follow Him.

The cross is an important symbol for the Christian. It stands for all we believe in as all we ever hope to be. Unfortunately, the cross as a Christian symbol has been taken over by the world. You see such secular entertainers as Madonna parading around half nude and making lewd suggestions with crosses on her ears and as a necklace about her throat. It is getting where the real Christians are reluctant to portray the symbol of Jesus' crucifixion in fear they'll be identified with that bunch.

Let's look a little further at the scene as our scripture has portrayed it. Three crosses – Jesus on the middle cross and two others on the same kind of cross on His left and on His right.

I like to think that the unrepentant thief was on his left and the repentant thief was on His right. The Bible doesn't say this, but Jesus said that He'd separate the sheep from the goats with the goats on the left and the sheep on the right. Anyway, for the purpose of this message, I will refer to the unrepentant thief as being on the left and the repentant thief as being on the right.

The people were mocking Jesus. These were probably the same people who had heard Him preach, who had eaten of the food created by His supernatural multiplication of the two fishes and five loaves of bread. They were people from all walks of life - the common people, the religious people, and the soldiers, all were taunting Him and shouting insults at the Son of God.

One of the men who was crucified beside Him, who was to suffer the same kind of horrible death as Jesus was, joined in on the taunting. He shouted, "**If you are the Christ, save yourself and us.**" He didn't really believe that Jesus could save himself.

He was just taunting Him. I can just hear him laugh when he said, **“us also”** as if he'd made a big joke of some kind.

However, something stirred in the feelings of the other thief, and he begins to admonish the loud mouth that was trying to insult Jesus.

Listen to his words again. **“Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.**

He recognized something in the spirit of Jesus that gave him hope, something supernatural. And, then he said unto Jesus, **“Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.**

And we all know Jesus' reply, **“Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise.”**

Salvation came to the repentant thief there in his last hour. This is the ultimate in a death bed confession. I can guarantee you that this man went to heaven for we get it from the very mouth of the one who assures all believers of the heavenly destiny, Jesus Christ himself.

After this thief died, he was translated into heaven. The other thief was translated straight into hell. They each had the same opportunity, but only one had a change of heart.

The Bible doesn't record anymore words from either of these men. We know that later on they are still alive after Jesus has given up the ghost. Their legs are broken so they will die more quickly, but no more words are necessary. Their journey into the next world has been charted. Their decisions are final.

***DESCRIBE CRUCIFIXION**

Three crosses and each one have a message for the modern day world. Today, I want to look at each one of them individually.

THE UNREPENTANT THIEF'S CROSS

The thief who didn't repent; what about his cross?

What can we glean from the way he ended his life that will help us today? Here he was on the left side of Jesus, closer to the Son of God than I am to you.

Why did this man fail to believe? He had heard the many miraculous things that Jesus had done. He knew that Jesus was innocent of the crimes His accusers had brought against Him. He just took a **“who cares”** attitude, and was only interested in himself.

It is the cross of this unrepentant thief that symbolizes all those who reject Christ – both then and now. The cross of the damned is what it stands for. Those who reject Christ and choose to spend eternity in hell even though the cross that saves stands as close as an arm's length away.

Who are these people who come right up to the throne of Grace, yet fail to partake of the richness of it's promise. The Bible tells us they are common people, rich people, and rulers of nations – people from all walks of life.

The people who were there at the cross taunting and ridiculing Jesus. The same kinds of people we have throughout the world today are doing exactly the same kinds of things and missing the only opportunity life has to offer.

When a person or a group of people put down, or ridicule the Christian faith, or the church of Jesus Christ, they are of the same mold as this UNREPENTANT thief.

When a person, or any group of people begin to add, or subtract from God's word, they are also in the same category. They are saying that God is a liar and they are smarter than He is. Many of our modern day theologians fit into this category. They'll have to answer before God one of these days.

The cults that we see springing up everywhere, leading people to hell, worship this cross on the left of Jesus. They are such groups as Jim Jones, the recent Wacko from Waco David Koresh, Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, Mooneys, Catholicism, and on and on the names go.

They make such claims as, **“Jesus was just a man; we have a prophet as great as Jesus. The Bible doesn't tell the whole truth, our literature supplements the Bible and even takes precedent over it.”** And, so on the lies go as they stand there beneath the cross of the damned.

Perhaps, even closer home we talk to those who don't understand, or refuse to understand, the significance of what we're trying to do here at Harmony Baptist Church and other Bible believing churches throughout the world. They perhaps look at us as people trying to glorify ourselves because they don't want to accept the fact that they are lost and without hope.

You hear stories of why they don't become Christians, or claim to be Christian and don't attend church. **“The Christian church lifestyle is too limiting.”** **“I want to live my life in freedom.”** **“I'm just as good as any of those church members.”** **“I don't like so and so there.”** It all boils down to, **“THERE IS NO MILK IN THE REFRIGERATOR.”** (This refers to story about the pastor visiting a delinquent church member about his not attending church. He said “there is no milk in the refrigerator.” The pastor wanted to know what this had to do with attending church. The man answered, “When you don't want to attend, any excuse will do.”)

And on and on the excuses go, but if one comes to church to find perfect people, he'll get fooled every time. We are just common people, trying to do the best we can to please Christ in spite of all the old baggage the world keeps heaping upon us. Just sinners saved by grace that's all we are.

***ILLUSTRATION:**

I used to teach at Wake Tech in the Industrial/Mechanical Engineering Department. One day I was helping my class work some problems – it was an open time so that people could converse with each other. Several students were asking me questions, and I was trying to answer them as well as I could. The subject of my being a preacher came up, and I got several questions about my faith, which I answered, in my best Baptist fashion. One student, John, had a question that he said always puzzled him. It was regarding the behavior of so-called Christians as he stated it. He talked about the professing Christians he knew that were doing the many unchristian things that we all know about. He simply asked the Question, “Why should I be a Christian when the so-called Christians do the same things I do?” I replied to him that Christianity is a personal religion, and each person will stand before God to account for himself. I told him that when he had to answer before Christ for the life he lived, it wouldn't be a valid excuse that “someone else was doing it.” I told him that we know where the unsaved professing Christians were headed, and then I asked the Questions, “What about you John? How will you answer when the Lord confronts you about your behavior?” He had no answer. Just like the unsaved thief.

Look at the two thieves on the cross. They stand Symbolic of the world today. Not any difference that we can see, except one accepted the promise of Jesus, and the other didn't. That's the way we are too, saved by the precious blood of Jesus Christ, and **that is the only difference between us and the rest of the world.**

But the argument goes on, “**If you are a true follower of Jesus you'd be perfect.**” The same old excuse the UNREPENTANT thief used. And people will go to hell rather than admit they are wrong.

Sure, if Jesus had come down from the cross and took him with Him, he'd believed for a while. This is analogous to the “**Show me a miracle**” crowd today. “**Raise up the dead**”; “**Cure the sick**,” “**Move Mountains**” and I'll believe. You can't satisfy these kinds of people,

Jesus didn't even respond to the UNREPENTANT thief. He gave him up to his own destruction. When we run into people like that, we have to do exactly the same thing for there is no way to satisfy them. “**Don't cast your pearls among the swine.**” Jesus said.

THE REPENTANT THIEF'S CROSS

But, the cross on the right, that's another story. This man had seen and heard the exact same things the other one had, but something was different, for he recognized who Jesus was and who He still is in the world today, The savior of the world. He accepted the free gift of eternal life that Jesus had to offer. He didn't ask for proof. He just accepted. This cross on the right is symbolic of the cross of the saved.

When Jesus died, there were not many saved people around the cross. There were only a few of them at crucifixion, but very few. The apostles had taken off with the exception of John. Jesus' mother was there, and a few women, just a few believers to be there with Him in His direst hour.

The world today is much the same way. Just a few that will stay with Jesus to the end. Just a few that will accept His word by faith, for the story of the repentant Thief teaches us that faith is the only issue for the cross of the saved.

1. Faith starts, Hebrews 11:3 tells us, by believing that God spoke all the worlds into existence from nothing. We must note that there is no room for evolution here. Those who try to reconcile evolution with Christianity are fooling themselves. God will not be mocked, and those who claim to believe the Bible, and still claim to believe in evolution are mocking God.

It goes on to say that it must have substance. Faith without substance is not much faith. It must be the kind of faith that leads us to avoid sin and to be bold when sin confronts us. This includes not only the places we go, but also the people we associate with regularly.

2. Faith continues by accepting the Bible as God's holy divine Word. There are several sermons in this statement. We must not only accept the Bible as the Word of God, but we must study it to the degree that it becomes our standard for living. We must be alert to the lies that the scholars and false prophets are giving us, and believe only God when it comes to His Word.

3. And faith is fulfilled in accepting Jesus Christ as the Son of God who died on the cross for the sins of the world. You see it takes faith in God to even start. I know everybody believes in some sort of God to some degree. It may be the God of evolution, or the god of nature, but everyone has a god. However, only faith in the living God that created the universe and gave His Son to die for our sins will ever lead to saving faith.

I can't see how anyone can claim to believe in God and then say that the Bible is not completely true. You see only the Bible tells us about a Savior and His love for us. If it is not all true, then we can't believe any of it, for there is no way to prove that God told the truth in some areas and lied in others.

4. And faith is sanctified when we truly try to live our lives to serve Him. Here is where it gets sticky with some professing Christians. They want just enough Christianity to get to heaven, but not enough to interfere with their worldly pleasures. They seem to be always seeking the line between the world and salvation and want to live as close to it as possible. Many live on the wrong side of the line, planning to jump across at the last minute.

Clearly, the Bible teaches that we can't straddle the line. We're either for God, or else we are against Him. Those who try will be greatly surprised when they wake up in hell.

The cross of the saved, it is a symbol of faith. There it stands on the right hand of Jesus for all who will believe. For all who accept it awaits eternal life. The way is not easy. Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when He said "**take up your cross and follow me.**"

There may be hardships that go with this cross. You may be asked to do things you don't want to do. You may even be required to give your very life for His sake. But, when compared to the destiny of those who choose the cross of the damned, the cross of the saved stands as the only logical choice.

THE SAVIOR'S CROSS

The third cross at Calvary is the one we're most familiar with. It is the one we hold up for the world to see. It is the cross of the savior, Jesus Christ, very God Himself died on this cross so the world could have eternal life.

It brings with it a complex story of blood sacrifice that God ordained way back in the Garden of Eden. God killed animals to clothe Adam and Eve after the fall and He taught them about His requirement for blood sacrifice. **Cane and Able** knew all about

this blood-cleansing requirement. **Noah** brought this ordinance through the flood by the command of God. **Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the Children of Israel** continued this holy rite of blood sacrifice, and Moses recorded it so that it could be followed exactly as God wanted it to be ... Always pointing to the cross.

When the Israelites brought a sacrifice to the temple, it had to be a perfect animal, without spot or blemish. The man would place his hand on the animal's head to symbolize the transferring of his and his family's sins to the animal. It was then slain and the priest offered its blood to God. This took care of the sins of the man and his family for a period of time.

Yearly, the high priest would go in to the Holy of Holies and sprinkled blood as an offering to God for the entire nation of Israel. This was done at the time designated as the Passover, to acknowledge when the death angel passed over the nation of Israel before they departed Egypt.

The time of the Passover is when Jesus died. He held the last Passover supper with His disciples and was crucified the next day. Incidentally, this was the last Passover Celebration that God acknowledged, for the whole reason for the Passover was to point to Jesus.

Here was the supreme sacrifice for the sins of the entire world, for only God's own blood could purify the transgression that was made in the fall of man. Unlike the animal sacrifices that brought only temporary forgiveness, Jesus paid the price for all of man's crimes against God for all eternity. But, man has to accept it for it to be of any value to him.

This is what happened at Galgotha. One man accepted – one didn't. One went to Hell – one went to heaven – Symbolic of what is to happen to all people who have ever lived, or will ever live. It is a choice that each person will have to make for himself or herself, for everyone has a cross. It may be on the left, or it may be on the right. It all depends on how one accepts the center cross, for accepting this is the only way man can be washed clean of his sin.

This recording of the three crosses was not accidental, for everything in God's Word is there for a Purpose, all we have to do is look for it. I don't know why the thief on the left didn't accept Jesus. I don't know why people in the world today don't accept Jesus, but I know they don't, and when they die, hell awaits.

It all comes back to the faith issue I suppose. Some seem to be able to sense God and others don't. Satan often times seems to be able to get through and block out the best efforts of God and His people, but we can't quit, for Jesus told us to work until He came again, and friends, He's coming again soon. Let's all be ready.

If you're not saved, don't put it off planning for a death-bed confession, for you may not be as fortunate as the repentant thief. You may not have the opportunity he had.

Life is too uncertain – here today and gone to morrow. But, Jesus Christ, that's the real meaning of certainty. Where do you stand with Him? Are you lost? Are you saved? Do you serve Him the best you can? Your answers to these questions will determine your reward and Punishment, and will designate the cross you'll carry throughout eternity. The cross of the saved the cross of the damned – it's your choice.

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