

The Cross Divides Men

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And it was the third hour; and they crucified him. And the superscription of his accusation was written over, THE KING OF THE JEWS. And with him they crucify two thieves, the one on his right hand, and the other on his left. And the scripture was fulfilled, which saith, And he was numbered with the transgressors. And they that passed by railed at him, wagging their heads, and saying, Ah, thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself, and come down from the cross. So, also, the chief priests, mocking, said among themselves, with the scribes, He saved others; himself he cannot save. Let Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe. And they that were crucified with him reviled him. And when the sixth hour was come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? (Mark 15:25-34)

For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us who are saved it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18)

It is necessary to examine this verse for a moment so that we might arrive at an understanding of what Paul is really saying.

There are three words here that concern us. The first is “preaching” — “for the preaching of the cross.” The Greek word Paul used here is *logos*, and it simply means “word.” In one of our newer translations of the New Testament, *logos* is translated quite literally: “For the word of the cross is to them that perish foolishness.” However, it doesn’t tell us much when we only translate it literally. Paul actually had something else in mind.

Paul had a great deal to say in this epistle of 1 Corinthians about the gospel. He said to the Corinthian believers, “For I determined not to know any thing among you, except Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). Then, at the fifteenth chapter, he said, “I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and in which ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:1, 2). Then he gave the gospel facts: Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. According to Paul, that is the gospel. It is *all* the gospel, nothing else but the gospel, and anything else is *not* the gospel. Therefore, I would like to use the word I think Paul had in mind: “The *gospel* of the cross is to them that perish foolishness.”

Now “foolishness” is another interesting word. Although “foolishness” is a good translation, Paul was saying more than that. It is the Greek word *moria*, from which we get our English word “moron” or “moronic.” Actually, it means something that is good for nothing, something stupid. For the preaching of the cross — the gospel of the cross — is to them that perish good for nothing. It means nothing to them.

My wife and I sat in a motel coffee shop this morning, eating breakfast and noticing the people around us. To that crowd in the coffee shop, the cross probably is good for nothing. It doesn’t fit into their program. If I would attempt to tell them about it, they would say, “That’s stupid.” This is exactly what Paul said: the gospel of the cross is to them that perish stupid, but unto us who are saved it is the power of God.

That word “power” is the Greek *dunamis*, from which we get our English word “dynamite.”

The scientists made a big mistake years ago when they called the nitroglycerin explosive “dynamite.” I don’t know what they should have named it, but dynamite is from the Greek word indicating the nth of power. Right now, according to our present knowledge, the nth of power is atomic energy. Something else more powerful may be discovered in the future, but whatever the nth of power is, that is what the gospel is according to Paul.

Now there are two classes of people who come to the cross of Christ. To one class of folk, the cross of Christ is good for nothing — stupid. Another group of folk come to it and find in it the atomic power of God unto salvation.

If I were an artist, there is a picture that I would translate into color on canvas. It would be of a great barren field with not one spring of green in it. Down through the center of that field would be coming a plowshare, a big disc plow, in the shape of a cross, digging deep into the earth, and throwing soil on one side and on the other.

For more than nineteen hundred years now that cross has been coming down through this world, turning mankind, as the dust of the earth, on one side and on the other. Men have come to that cross, looked at it, and said, “It is foolishness to me; it has no meaning for my life,” and they have gone in one direction to their place. Others have come to this cross and have found in it the power of God; it has saved them, and they have gone a different direction into eternity. Oh, I know, there are people who say, “I have my own opinion, my own viewpoint.” That is fine, but your viewpoint of Jesus Christ and the cross will not change Him or that cross one whit — but it will change your eternal destiny. What you think of the cross tells who you are; it does not tell who He is or what the cross is. There have been too many men down through the centuries who have found in the cross the power of God for the evaluation of little man to make any impression on it whatsoever.

A young couple went to Europe on their honeymoon. While in Paris, France, they went to the Louvre. When they found that it was a museum of art, they hurried down one corridor after another to find the exit. As they went out, one turned to the other and said, “It is ridiculous to charge two francs to see all those old pictures!” Behind them an elderly gentleman tapped them on the shoulder and said, “I could not help overhearing what you said. I come here every day, I spend hours here. The Louvre has been here for several hundred years and when you come here, it is not on trial — *you* are on trial. What you think of it does not tell what the Louvre is; it does tell who you are.”

Likewise, my friend, when you come to the cross of Christ, what you think of the cross won’t affect it one whit. It has been the dynamite of God for over nineteen hundred years, but it will tell who *you* are, and it will tell your eternal destiny.

Now I want to bring to the cross certain people who were actually present at the crucifixion of Christ. In some way all of them participated in or witnessed the crucifixion of Christ, and we shall see how that cross separated them.

The Cross Divided Two Romans

First of all, I would like to bring two Romans who had a great deal to do with the crucifixion: Pilate and the Roman centurion who crucified Him. The cross divided these two men.

Pilate

Pilate was a puppet of Rome, a cheap politician. He did not want to make a decision concerning Jesus — he made that adequately clear — but he also did not want to offend the people. He was a typical politician, wanting to please everybody.

When they brought Jesus to him, at first he did not quite understand what they really wanted. He brought Jesus into the judgment hall and said (I'll put this in good old Americana), "If You will just cooperate with me, I can get You off. No problem." But he found out that the Lord Jesus was not going to cooperate. That made Pilate a little uneasy. So he went out to the people and said, "Look, this is just a religious matter, and I don't know much about your religion. You folk take it and settle it; don't turn it over to me!"

The chief priests said, "We're sorry, but we cannot settle it. We are not permitted to give the death penalty, and that is what we are demanding."

Pilate was startled and asked, "What has He done to merit death?"

"He has made Himself a king! We worship and honor Caesar — we don't honor *Him*. We think He is a traitor."

Pilate said to Jesus again, "Come on inside and let's talk this over." When they were again inside the hall of judgment, Pilate said, "Now look, all You have to do is just say You are not a king and that You do not want to overthrow Rome. Just cooperate with me, we'll go back out there, and I'll have You freed in a few moments." But he found that Jesus was not cooperating. So the third time he took Him inside, and again Pilate tried to get off the hook. It was not Jesus trying to escape; it was Pilate. My friend, after you read the account with the perspective of nearly two thousand years of history, you can see that Jesus was not on trial; Pilate was the one on trial. Pilate was attempting to free himself, Jesus was not.

For example, the enemy had said, "We will not take Jesus during the feast because of the people. He is popular with the crowds; so we'll wait until after the feast when the crowds are gone." But the Lord Jesus, when He met with His own men, told them, "I'll die during the feast."

When did He die? He died on the feast day! He had set the time of His death. My friend, He is a King all the way through. King Lear's claim concerning himself, "I am a king, every inch a king," certainly applied to the Lord Jesus. He was a King, every inch a King. He was in command even during His trial, and Pilate in desperation asked His accusers (imagine a *judge* asking this), "What shall I do then with Jesus, who is called Christ?" (Matthew 27:22).

He couldn't believe his ears when that crowd, that mob which had been coached and brain-washed, demanded, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him and release to us Barabbas" — the worst criminal he had in incarceration. You see, this man Pilate thought he had a way out when he offered them Barabbas. He did not know how base men could become — although he was very base himself. Pilate, thinking he could escape the guilt of it, called for a basin of water, and he washed his hands before them, saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this righteous person" (Matthew 27:24). It is ironic that the oldest creed of the church still says, "Crucified under Pontius Pilate." Pilate did not escape. He had to make a decision relative to Christ. His decision was that Christ's death was good for nothing. I am sure his thinking was, *He did not have to die; I could have gotten Him off. That was stupid!* And Pilate went into eternity his way.

There are two traditions concerning Pilate's life after this experience. One tradition is that he took his ill-gotten political gains and bought a villa up in northern Italy. One day he was entertaining guests from Palestine. After a sumptuous meal they were walking through his spacious gardens, and one of the guests asked him, "Do you remember the trial of Jesus of Nazareth?"

Pilate stroked his chin and answered, “No, I don’t seem to recall it.”

The other tradition is that he began to travel. He had a bad conscience, and he couldn’t get away from it. He ended up at the Pillar of Hercules which was a jumping-off place, not only for the Roman Empire, but they thought it was the jumping-off place of the earth. It *was* a jumping-off place for Pilate, for he plunged to his death on the rocks.

Those are the two traditions that have come down to us. I do not know whether either of them is true, but I do know that Pilate never forgot the trial of Jesus of Nazareth, and that he went into eternity his way.

A Roman Centurion

Now there was another man, a Roman official, who wore the same kind of livery as Pilate. His paychecks were signed by the same treasurer. He had the same philosophy of life; he had the same religion — he worshiped Apollo and the Caesar who was on the throne. On a certain day, there was delivered into his hand men to be crucified. The gospel records tell us about three who were crucified, but Sir William Ramsay, who made quite a study of this, says there were probably nearer to three hundred men crucified that day. You see, Rome was not in the retail business of crucifying; Rome was in the wholesale business of crucifying! Rome crucified thousands and thousands of men. But on this particular day when the centurion started out from home, I suppose his wife said to him, “Shall I fix you a good lunch today?” And he answered, “Yes, I’ve got a big day ahead of me — I’ll be crucifying quite a few men today.” He went out to his job that day and paid very little attention to the men he was executing until there came this One — Jesus.

Something very strange took place at the beginning. This centurion had been cursed in every language of the Roman Empire, and there were over one hundred languages. This man knew what it was to handle criminals at the time of death. On this day there was put into his hands this One, Jesus of Nazareth. When he read the charges against Him, he could not believe it. Then he heard Jesus say, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). That alerted him to this Man. So he began to watch.

Mark, in his record which I quoted at the beginning of this message, gave us the crucifixion by the clock. At nine o’clock Jesus was put on the cross. For three hours there was physical light, but it was spiritual darkness. The last three hours, from twelve noon to three o’clock in the afternoon, there was physical darkness, but it was spiritual light. In those first three hours, man did his *worst*; in the last three hours, God did His *best*. In the first three hours, it was man venting his hatred upon this One who was dying there. They did everything they could think of to ridicule Him as He was suffering. Then at twelve noon, God dropped down the mantle of night upon that cross as if to say to the world, “You can’t see how horrible this really is.”

Now, I know today there are ministers who try to show they are fundamental by depicting the cross in all of its gory, bloody detail, but you won’t find any detail in the Word of God. God put the mantle of darkness down over that cross so that we couldn’t see it. What you prove when you try to paint the cross in its bloody detail is that you are crude, not fundamental.

Therefore, during the last three hours — hear me carefully — that cross became an altar on which “the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world” was offered (John 1:29). It was in those three hours that the Lord said through the prophet Isaiah, “It pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief” (Isaiah 53:10). In those three hours was the fulfillment of what

John the Baptist had said: “Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world.” And during those three hours, He “who knew no sin [was made] to be sin for us” (2 Corinthians 5:21). He took your place; He took my place. He died in your stead and in my stead. That is the way God must treat sin and sinners. Although the Lord Jesus is the holy Son of God, in those three hours He bore the sin of the world. Then as light broke on that cross, I think the centurion looked at the most horrible sight he’d ever seen, because Isaiah said that our Savior was bruised more than any man (see Isaiah 52:14). He must have looked terrible, hanging there. This centurion stepped out from the crowd, took his place beneath the cross, and said, “Truly this man was the Son of God” (Mark 15:39).

Now I know today that there are theologians who say, “That is not an adequate confession. He couldn’t join *my* church by saying only that.” But let me remind you that the centurion was living up to the light he had up to that moment. He had come a long way. Now I’ll agree that he had never read Hodge’s theology — and I have always felt he was lucky to have missed that! Neither had he gone to some of our theological seminaries — and that, my friend, was a blessing! Neither had he read any of my books, which may have been a blessing also. Although he did not know a great deal, he knew enough to take his place beneath the cross of Christ. Do you know that all God has ever asked any sinner to do is to take his place beneath the cross of Christ? It’s not how much you *know*, it’s whom you *believe* — that’s the thing that is important. And the centurion went into eternity a different way than how Pilate went.

The Cross Divided Two Apostles

The cross also divided two apostles who, six months before the Lord Jesus died, heard Him make the first announcement at Caesarea Philippi (according to the record) that He was going to Jerusalem to die. He outlined this in detail, saying, “I will be delivered into the hands of the Gentiles, I’ll be crucified, and I will be raised from the dead on the third day” (see Matthew 20:17-19). I don’t think they got the message — I don’t think any of them did. On the way down from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem, five times (according to Matthew) He went over that ground again with them. The Son of Man was going to Jerusalem to *die*. As Dr. Luke put it, “He steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). As He moved down toward Jerusalem, these men were wondering; but whatever He was going to do, they were all with Him — all but one, Judas.

Judas

Let’s see Judas and John in contrast, for the cross divided those two men. The reason I choose them is because they came closer to Christ than any other two. Judas kissed Him, and John reclined on His bosom. Although they both got close to Him, the cross divided them.

As they came down to Jerusalem, this man Judas bargained to betray Him! I must confess to you, and please don’t let it get out, but I really don’t understand Judas. I never have understood him. And I find that I don’t understand evil today. Do you understand evil? Evil is complicated; goodness is simple. Let me illustrate this. Suppose I am holding behind me a stick that is straight as an arrow, and I ask you to draw a picture of it. You would draw it exactly as it is, because there’s only one way of being straight. But suppose I have a crooked stick behind me, and you draw it the way you think it is. You couldn’t possibly be accurate, because it can be

crooked in a million different ways. I don't understand Judas — never quite figured him out. But I do know that the Lord Jesus gave him ample opportunity to turn to Him.

The theologians kick around the theory that Judas was predestined to betray Christ. I'll let them settle that, but I do know this: the Lord Jesus didn't turn against Judas even when he came that night with the crowd of armed men with the understanding that the One he kissed would be the One to arrest. When Judas kissed our Lord, Jesus said this strange thing to him, "Friend, why art thou come?" (Matthew 26:50). In effect, He was saying, "Judas, you have now fulfilled prophecy, but it's not too late for you. I can still call you *friend* because I'll be dying for you in just a few hours. I'll be taking the penalty of your sin." Judas had that opportunity to turn to Him in confession and repentance. When they were leading Jesus away through the temple to crucify Him, this man Judas came, threw the money down, and said, "I've betrayed innocent blood" (see Matthew 27:3, 4). But to whom was he confessing it? He confessed to the priests. Why didn't he fall down before *Jesus* and say, "Forgive me!" If he had, he would have been forgiven, but he did not. I don't understand him. Judas went into eternity his own way.

John

John stands in sharp contrast to Judas. We hear John called the apostle of love. He would get a great laugh out of that if he were here today. John was not the apostle of love. While it is true that he did write the wonderful epistles that bear his name, and he did write, "For God so loved the world..." (John 3:16), the Lord Jesus never called him an apostle of love. Jesus called him a son of *thunder* (see Mark 3:17)! Where did he get the name of an apostle of love? Well, I don't know, but some artist in the Middle Ages painted a picture of John with *curls!* (I would not want to face John after having done such a thing.) Ever since, he's been considered the ladylike apostle. Oh, my friend, John was a big rugged fisherman, — not quite an apostle of love. What kind of man was John? Listen to him:

And John answered, and said, Master, we saw one casting out demons in thy name; and we forbade him, because he followeth not with us. And Jesus said unto him, Forbid him not; for he that is not against us is for us. (Luke 9:49, 50)

Then later when the Samaritans did not receive Jesus into their village, the record tells us:

And when his disciples, James and John, saw this, they said, Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elijah did? (Luke 9:54)

Imagine him saying, "I think we ought to bring fire down from heaven and get rid of them!" Does that sound like the apostle of *love*? Then again, he and his brother James came to the Lord Jesus, and he said something like this: "Now these other men You have are fine men, but James and I have talked it over and we want You to give us places of honor in Your kingdom, one on Your right hand and one on Your left" (see Mark 10:35-37). Does that sound like an apostle of love? But that was John.

However, that man stood yonder at the cross of Christ, and when Jesus was dying He turned over His mother to John's care. When John wrote his gospel, he could write:

And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.
(John 20:30, 31)

John went into eternity by a different route than Judas. “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us who are saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18).

The Cross Divided Women

Now I want to bring two women to that cross. Both of these women came very close to it.

The Wife of Pilate

First, I want to bring the wife of Pilate. We do not know much about her. We only know that she was aware of the trial of Jesus, and she knew how her husband was being involved. Not wanting him to be a part of it, she sent this word to him — and this is all we have:

When he [Pilate] was seated on the judgment seat, his wife sent unto him, saying, Have thou nothing to do with that righteous man; for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him. (Matthew 27:19)

She was superstitious. We know now that throughout the Graeco-Roman world were mystery religions in which women participated. In fact, they were the leaders in them (the United States is not the first, you see, to have religions headed up by women!). In the history of that era, we find that some of the religions were the most immoral that you can imagine. The initiations were unspeakable. In passing, let me mention just one thing that was done. In the initiation of the Eleusinian mysteries, the female initiates were brought in, and immediately after a large bull was stabbed, these female initiates set upon it, eating the flesh while the animal was yet alive, and continued to bite him until he was dead!

Rome at this time was seething with superstitions. The wife of Pilate revealed this influence. She said to him, “I dreamed about this man. Let’s have nothing to do with Him.” I think she gave Pilate the suggestion of washing his hands.

When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this righteous person. See ye to it. (Matthew 27:24)

The wife of Pilate was only a step away from the cross, but it meant nothing to her personally, for she was in superstition and ignorance. She went into eternity her own way.

Mary of Bethany

Mary of Bethany was one of the loveliest people in the Scripture. Yonder at that supper at Bethany — which in one sense was Christ’s last supper, a supper at which He met with His disciples and friends — Mary took her alabaster box of ointment, the most valuable thing that she had, broke it, and poured the spikenard on the head and feet of Jesus. The disciples, inspired by Judas, began to rebuke her. In fact, they said to the Lord Jesus, “Why was this waste of the ointment made?” (Mark 14:4). But our Lord reared a monument to her — not a monument of cold marble or brass, but a monument that is a sweet aroma. He said, “Wherever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of, for a memorial of her” (Mark 14:9). Her story has gone around the world many times and has made the world a little sweeter. He knew that she had entered into His death. You can talk about the apostolic succession all you want to — I don’t want to be in it. Those fellows had no understanding of His approaching suffering and death. But Mary brought the alabaster box, broke it, and poured the fragrance on Him as if to say, *I understand*. And He said, “For the day of my burial hath she kept this” (John 12:7). To her, the cross of Christ was not something from which to turn away. She found in it the power of God unto salvation.

The Cross Divided Enemies

Notice now its effect on the lives of two Pharisees who at first saw eye-to-eye, but who were divided by the cross so that one went into eternity one way and the other into eternity another way.

The Pharisees were a religio-political party. As a religious party, they were what we would classify as fundamental in the faith. They believed in the inspiration of the Old Testament, the existence of the supernatural, the existence of angels, and the Resurrection. Actually, in our day, they could be classified as “cold-blooded fundamentalists.” Although they believed the Word of God, their lives did not evidence its influence. How easy it always has been to simply say, “Yes, I believe,” without the Word actually affecting the heart!

When the Pharisees came into the presence of Christ, they were much impressed by Him and felt that He was the One they wanted. They sent Nicodemus to Him, thinking that somehow they would win Him over to their side. They soon found, however, that they couldn’t win Him over, but that He was attempting to win them over to His side — and they did not like that. Gradually, the Pharisees became His enemies, and in the end they joined with the Herodians in the plot to nail Him to the cross.

Pharisee Number One

One of the Pharisees was, I am confident, an enemy of the Lord Jesus Christ all the way through. One Sabbath day, he invited the Lord Jesus home to dinner. You would think that if this man invited Jesus to dinner, he couldn’t be His enemy. Yes, he could! His invitation was not a gesture of friendliness. He invited our Lord to dinner in order that his crowd might find something with which they could charge Him. The fact of the matter is they planted a crippled man at the very door.

And it came to pass, as he went into the house of one of the chief Pharisees to eat on the sabbath day, that they watched him. And, behold, there was a certain man

before him who had the dropsy. (Luke 14:1, 2)

They had put him there, knowing that our Lord would heal him (and He did), even though it was the Sabbath day. (His enemies inadvertently paid Him the finest compliment.) They were ganging up on Him, and His host was the chief, leading the opposition against Him. In no sense was his invitation to dinner an expression of friendship. You know, when folk invite you to dinner, it means they are your friends. That is one place where you never are to be betrayed. One of the worst breaches of etiquette, in fact, one of the lowest things a person can do, is to betray one whom he has invited into his home for dinner.

But this Pharisee, a scheming rascal, soon found that he had a guest who could take care of Himself. In fact, when dinner was announced, our Lord watched as the guests took their places at the table. There were no placecards in those days, so they all tried to get the chief place. When He came in and sat down — probably in the lowest place — He said something like this: “When you are invited to dinner, don’t try to get the highest place; go to the lowest place. Then in case your host feels that you ought to be moved up, you will be honored when he comes to you and taps you on the shoulder and moves you to a place of honor. But it is rather embarrassing to have managed to elbow your way into a good spot and then have the host say, ‘Wait a minute, you have Mr. So-and-So’s place. I want you to come around here and take the last place at the table.’” (See Luke 14:7-11.) So he corrected their manners.

Christ had gone to the home of an enemy, a ruler of the Pharisees. This man joined with those who crucified Him. When he looked at the cross and the crowd beneath it, this Pharisee said, “It is foolishness — I see nothing in that cross.” And so he went into eternity his own way.

Pharisee Number Two

Now I want to introduce to you another Pharisee who eventually came to the Lord Jesus. He probably was the greatest enemy the Lord Jesus Christ ever had. I do not believe that anyone has ever hated Christ as Saul of Tarsus hated Him. I do not believe that Justin the Apostate hated Him as intensely as did Saul of Tarsus. He was a Pharisee of the Pharisees, the best prospect that they had. He was a young man; he had been trained in the best school, the school of Gamaliel. He was brilliant, probably one of the most brilliant men the world has ever produced — so much so that Festus the governor said, “Much learning doth make thee mad.” He was an educated man, and he hated Jesus.

Although the Scripture is silent on this point, I think that he was present at the crucifixion of Jesus. We know how much Saul hated Him. We know that after the death and resurrection of Christ, and after the Day of Pentecost when the church began and persecution broke upon it, the man who led the persecution was Saul of Tarsus. All the other Pharisees, when the Christians had been driven out of Jerusalem, seemed satisfied and did not care about pursuing them any further. But Saul of Tarsus went to the chief priest and asked that he be given letters to the synagogues in Damascus, for he had heard that numbers of the Christians had gone that way and he did not intend to rest until he was assured that everyone who named the name of Jesus was either imprisoned or put to death. He hated them because he hated Christ. Imagine this brilliant young Pharisee, hating Jesus as he did and as energetic as he was, staying home on the day of the crucifixion, saying, “Well, I have some studying that I have to do” or “I have something else that will occupy my mind for this day.” No, I think he joined that group of Pharisees that sat

down, shot out the lip, and mocked Him as He hung on the cross.

Later, on the way to Damascus with papers, breathing out threats, hating the Christians and hating Christ, the Lord Jesus waylaid him, knocked him down into the dust. This man, Saul of Tarsus, found out that Jesus of Nazareth was alive and that He was his Savior and the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. And he yielded his heart and life to Jesus Christ (see Acts 9:1-16). Years later he wrote, “He loved me and gave Himself for me” (see Galatians 2:20). I believe he was remembering that day he stood ridiculing beneath the cross and heard Jesus say, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). He had thought he knew what he was doing. At that time, the cross was foolishness to him, but years later he declared, “It is the power of God unto salvation.” It transformed his life.

Two Pharisees came to the cross. One of them said, “It’s foolishness,” and he went into eternity his way. Another Pharisee came to the cross, and for him it had no meaning — but wait a minute, then he met the One who died on that cross, and was able to say, “He loved me and gave Himself for me...for the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us who are saved it is the power of God” (see Galatians 2:20 and 1 Corinthians 1:18).

The Cross Divided Even Thieves

Now I want to bring just one other couple to the cross. These two men were there, hanging on crosses on either side of the Lord Jesus Christ. The cross divided the two thieves — and I do mean in the sense that one was on the left and one was on the right. But the cross also divided the two thieves for eternity. I have a question to ask you as you look at those men: What was the difference between those two thieves? Both of them had been tried before a Roman court, both were convicted for the same kind of crime, both merited capital punishment, and they both agreed that it was a right sentence. What was the difference in the two thieves? Years ago I asked that question in a summer Bible school and this towheaded, bright little fellow answered, “One of them was a good thief and one was a bad thief.” I am of the opinion that a great many people today think that was the difference — one was a bad thief and one was a good thief. Thieves come in only one classification — *bad*. There is no such thing as a good thief. Both of these men were bad, and both at the beginning ridiculed Christ.

I have another question to ask you: To what church did the two thieves belong? What ceremony did they go through? Don’t misunderstand me, I was a pastor for forty years and I believe in the local church, and I believe in baptism, but what about those two thieves? They were divided. What divided them?

I have often wondered what the liberal would have said to them. There was a liberal preacher with whom I used to play handball. Although we were friends, we were on opposite sides of the fence as far as theology was concerned. I asked him one day, “What would you tell that thief on the cross to do in order to get to heaven?”

He said, “I don’t know.”

“Well, you had better hurry and tell him something, because he is dying.”

“I don’t know, I guess he would be the exception.”

I said, “Don’t you think he might be the *rule* that is being set for time and eternity? Are you going to tell him to perform some good works with his hands? If you said that to him, you’d mock him. He would say, ‘Look, my hands are nailed to the cross, and they’ll not be taken down except in death.’ Tell me something else, would you tell him to run on errands of mercy?”

He would reply, ‘Again, you mock me! My feet are nailed to this cross.’ What are you going to say to him?”

That thief who started out ridiculing Christ, came to the conclusion that the One dying on that central cross was not only innocent, but He was dying for somebody else. In fact, He was dying for *him*, and He was in contact with God. So he in faith looked to Him and said, “Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom” (Luke 23:42). He had nothing to offer but his simple faith. To that man, whom society said was not fit to live on this earth, the Lord Jesus said, “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). One thief went with Christ; the other went the other way.

Three men shared death upon a hill,
But only one man died,
A thief and God Himself made rendezvous.
Three crosses still
Are borne up Calvary’s hill
Where sin still lifts them high.
Upon the one, hang broken men who cursing die;
The other holds the praying thief.
And those as penitent as he
Still find the Christ beside them on the tree.

— Author unknown

You

What do you see in the cross? An innocent man dying unjustly? Or do you see the cruelty of the execution and your heart goes out in pity? How kindly I want to say this: He said to the daughters of Jerusalem, “Weep not for me, but weep for yourselves” (Luke 23:28). He does not want your sympathy.

Can you see in the cross of Christ what the dying thief saw? What John the beloved saw? What the Apostle Paul saw? The cross is the sign of God’s redeeming grace. Multitudes have come to it and have found the power of God.

My friend, what does the cross mean to you? Have you really turned to Christ? He is the One who died for you on the cross, rose again, paid the penalty for your sins, lives today in glory, and is returning to earth some day. Have you really trusted Him?

For the preaching of [the gospel of] *the cross is to them that perish foolishness* [stupid; good for nothing]; *but unto us who are saved it is the power of God* [unto salvation]. (1 Corinthians 1:18)