The Three Crosses

Luke 23:32-43

4/7/23 (Good Friday)

On the day of Jesus’ crucifixion, there were three crosses on that hill. What was the difference between the three crosses on Golgotha? Have you ever thought about that? Each one had someone different on it with a different story and a different purpose.

The Gospel of Luke gives an eye-witness account of the scene at the cross.

Luke 23:32–43

*” 32 Two others, both criminals, were led out to be executed with him. 33 When they came to a place called The Skull, they nailed him to the cross. And the criminals were also crucified—one on his right and one on his left. 34 Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” And the soldiers gambled for his clothes by throwing dice. 35 The crowd watched, and the leaders scoffed. “He saved others,” they said, “let him save himself if he is really God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.” 36 The soldiers mocked him, too, by offering him a drink of sour wine. 37 They called out to him, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” 38 A sign was fastened above him with these words: “This is the King of the Jews.” 39 One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed, “So you’re the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you’re at it!” 40 But the other criminal protested, “Don’t you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? 41 We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn’t done anything wrong.” 42 Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” 43 And Jesus replied, “I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

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Calvary or the Place of the Skull, was the place of execution. It’s where the Romans carried out capital punishment and it was location of the three crosses. To us in the Christian era, over 2,000 years removed from that awful day, one cross stands out and that was Jesus’s Cross.

Crucifixion was an instrument of execution performed by the Roman Empire that was meant to humiliate its subjects. It was meant to be a public spectacle and to warn others of the consequences of breaking the law. It was a horrible death that saw the piercing of the hands and feet of its victims. Hours would pass by as their bodies hung on the cross. They would experience trouble breathing and would like experience raging thirst that tortured them in the dust and heat, under the gaze of passersby.

On this particular Friday, there were three men, three crosses, & the same death for all three. But how were they different? We might wonder what led the rulers to crucify Jesus with the thieves.

* Was it just accidental, as some might say?
* Were there three men condemned at the same time?
* Did the captain of the garrison think to himself, "Let’s get it out of the way; do all three of them together"?
* Or was crucifying Jesus with common criminals a final act of cruelty thought out by his enemies, which was calculated to heighten the shame and to humiliate Jesus further in front of the crowd?

One can imagine them enjoying a sneer at the expense of Jesus - "Crucify him with thieves; yes, I like it!" Though we don’t know how it came about, we know that there were three crosses on the hill of Calvary. The crosses were the same, and yet they were vastly different.

**1. The Cross of Rebellion**

This is the cross of the man who mocked Jesus in his hour of humiliation and shame. The dying thief was a shameless criminal, coarsened and hardened in sin. Even the soberness of death couldn’t restrain the blasphemies from his lips. He could see Jesus and hear him pray for his murderers. You might expect that at the time of death, a man might think about spiritual things and getting his soul ready to meet his maker. Not this man. This man had been a prisoner of hate and evil for so long, he could not change now.

You might think just human decency would cause this man to be quiet when the mother of this man was lying at his feet in tears. You would think any decent human being would have some respect. You would be wrong. This man still had no remorse and continued to hurl insults at Jesus. He mocked Christ when he said, He was bitter, spurning the good even on the day of his dying, and cursing his way to hell in the most solemn hour of all history. His was a cross of Rebellion because his was a heart of rebellion. He had the chance even then of receiving forgiveness, but he threw it away.

* You might think of a similar situation with someone dying in a hospital who is having the Gospel proclaimed to them. It is astonishing that it is not uncommon for such people to still reject Christ even at the brink of death. But we should not be surprised by them or by the thief. They have lived a life without God, rejecting God, and rejecting all things spiritual. They cannot just make a complete change, like turning on a light switch. They have determined their course, and their end, and now they are unable to change.

High up in the Canadian Rockies there is a sign that says, "The Great Divide". It’s the source of two great river systems, one flowing west into the Pacific Ocean, and the other into the Atlantic. Two raindrops can fall side by side, but will flow in opposite directions, never to meet again.

* That thief came to the great divide that day. There were two decisions he could make. 1) Accept Jesus and confess his sins. 2) Reject Jesus and die in his sins. One choice led to eternal life and the other to eternal hell. The thief made his last choice in life and its results would be forever. His was a cross of Rebellion.

It’s truly unfortunate, but too many people today fall into this category… the cross of Rebellion and it leads to eternal hell. But there was a second cross on the hill that day.

**2. The Cross of Repentance**

This is the cross of the remorseful thief. We don’t know anything about him other than the fact that he too was a thief like the other guilty man. Both were being justly punished for their crimes. Both were guilty and both were deserving of death. In hindsight we want to think maybe this criminal was not as vile as the other. Perhaps his crime was not as grievous as that of the other criminal. We want to believe maybe his sin was some small crime. Perhaps he stole food because his family was starving. But we don’t know that. All we know is that he, like the other criminal, was guilty of some crime.

Yet, there was something very different about this second criminal. He was able to recognize that Jesus was no common criminal like themselves. What was it?

* Maybe life had not hardened this thief as it had the other.
* Maybe this thief still had a flickering light of humanity and spiritual sensitivity.
* He wasn’t less guilty. He appears to be just less hardened, less bitter, and less resentful against the world and against God.
* Perhaps he had a spiritual upbringing and seeing Jesus’ mother made him think of his own mother and caused him to become repentant.
* Or perhaps he was older and more mature so he could understand his own guilt.
* Perhaps he was just less self-centered.
* Maybe it was something about the way that Jesus conducted himself which convicted the thief of his own vileness when contrasted with the righteousness of Jesus, visible to all who had eyes to see it.
* Maybe it was that instead of curses from the lips of Jesus as the soldiers hammered in the nails, he heard a prayer of forgiveness for his torturers.

It seems likely that this man had known of the life of Jesus, for when the other thief was shouting abuse at Jesus, this fellow tried to restrain him and told him that although they were receiving the just reward of their misdeeds, Jesus had done nothing wrong.

The drawing of the Holy Spirit allowed this thief to see Jesus for who He really is.

Though much assumption can be made, we can know that it was the Lord that caused the heart of this thief to be softened. It wasn't because this thief was more spiritually aware, but it was because of the gracious moving of the Holy Spirit that allows this thief to see Christ as he really is - the Messiah.

The second thief was guilty, but he feared God and that was the beginning of his repentance. No one is beyond hope of redemption if they still have some fear of God. As he thought about the fundamental issues of life and death, of right and wrong, faith rose in his soul by the power of the Holy Spirit, and he blurted out his appeal. It was a plea which didn’t fall on deaf ears. The response was immediate.

The cross of repentance teaches that The way of salvation is simple. The devil has blinded the eyes of men and women to thinking that it is hard to be saved and that it's difficult to become a Christian. But this clearly isn’t true. The man was saved simply by asking the Lord to save him.

In the words of his request, there is surely an attitude of repentance as he threw himself on the mercy of Jesus. He believed the Lord could and would save him and he committed himself to the Lord and trusted him to save him.

That’s all that is necessary to salvation - repentance and faith.

Joel 2:12-13 quotes God in saying “*That is why the Lord says, “Turn to me now, while there is time. Give me your hearts. Come with fasting, weeping, and mourning.* ***13****Don’t tear your clothing in your grief but tear your hearts instead.” Return to the Lord your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. He is eager to relent and not punish.*

* The cross of Repentance reminds us that the worst sinner may be saved, but time is of the utmost importance. The extent of this criminal’s sin didn’t alter his chance of being saved one little bit. Let no-one despair in thinking that they are too bad to be saved.

Salvation doesn’t depend religious ceremonies, good deeds, or any contribution from you other than repentance and faith.

**3. The Cross of Redemption**

At his trial by the Jews, no grounds had been established on which he could justly be condemned. So, false witnesses were bribed to lie. Pilate in his examination concluded that Jesus had done nothing worthy of punishment.

Why then did Jesus die? Was it all a horrible miscarriage of justice? From the human point of view there’s no greater blot on human history than the story of Calvary. It is history’s darkest atrocity, but it also the climax of God’s plan of redemption. This tells us that God in His mercy and love for us, took the initiative in our redemption. God caused Christ to be identified with human sin in order that we might become identified with righteousness, his righteousness and be restored to Him.

The death of Christ was quite different from the two other victims. They died without any choice in the matter. Their lives were taken away. But it was quite different with Jesus. In advance of the crucifixion, he had told his disciples, His death was inevitable only because he willed it so.

He was our substitute, thus why he suffered and died. The basis for our redemption is the shedding of his blood. The sacrifices of the Old Testament pointed towards this once and for all effective sacrifice. Satan did his worst on Calvary. Wicked hands took and crucified the Lord of life, but where man’s rebellion against God reached its limit, the grace of God shines through in all of its splendor.

* The Battle of Waterloo in 1815, all of England was waiting for the result of the war. It was arranged that when news of the war reached the country, it should be rushed to Winchester and then signaled to other towns by flags from the cathedral tower. The great moment arrived, and the words were spelt out letter by letter, "Wellington defeated..." Then suddenly the tower was shrouded by fog, and the country was filled with gloom, thinking that was the end of the message. After a while the fog lifted, and the message was completed "Wellington defeated the enemy!" Those last words made all the difference in the world.

At Calvary the devil tried to make out that the message was "Christ defeated..." - he died. That would have been the case if Good Friday was the end of the story, but the resurrection that followed on Easter Day proves that the message of the cross of Redemption is that

"Christ defeated the enemy!"

Conclusion

There were many people who were instrumental in crucifying our Lord. There were the teachers who hated him, the traitor who sold him, the priests who bought him, even the disciples who deserted him.

But the story remains academic unless we each admit, "I was there, too". In a very real sense, we were all at Calvary, because it was my sins and your sins which Jesus took to the cross.

We have a choice between the cross of rebellion and the cross of repentance. Look to the cross of redemption and be saved!