

MATTHEW 27:27-50

THE CROSS

"Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole Roman cohort around Him. And they stripped Him, and put a scarlet robe on Him. And after weaving a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand; and they kneeled down before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they spat on Him, and took the reed and began to beat Him on the head. And after they had mocked Him, they took His robe off and put His garments on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him.

". . . And when they had crucified Him, they divided up His garments among themselves, casting lots, . . ." (27:27-50).

Having established the identity and innocence of Jesus through the accounts of His trials, Matthew now describes His sufferings and death on the cross. Actually, "describes" is not the proper term, for none of the Gospel writers dwell on the gruesome details of crucifixion or highlight the agony which Jesus experienced. The unimaginably horrible death by crucifixion was well known in first-century Palestine. Simply to say "crucified" was enough.¹

The idea of Jesus' dying on the cross is so horrible that it sometimes produces within us a sense of *denial*. We tend to say, "He probably didn't really feel it, since He was the Son of God." Or, "It wasn't what God intended. It was an unfortunate tragedy, but not the will of God." But worse yet is the suggestion that the cross was not absolutely necessary in order to bring about

man's salvation, that "God could have chosen another way."²

THE HEART OF OUR MESSAGE

The cross became the very *heart* of the good news about Jesus as preached by the apostles—not only the *fact* of it, but the *necessity* of it as well.

Matthew says, "From that time Jesus Christ began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day" (16:21). When Jesus was arrested, He said, "But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled" (26:56).

In Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, he announced, "This Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death" (Acts 2:23).

Paul encountered resistance to the idea of the cross in his day. In 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 he responded:

For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside." Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs, and

¹For a thorough discussion of crucifixion in the ancient world, see D. H. Wheaton, "Crucifixion," *The New Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 281-82.

²Such an idea fails utterly to take seriously the suffering of the cross. If there were "some other way," surely God would have taken it! See the Scriptures mentioned in this lesson stressing the *necessity* of the cross.

Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

He then added concerning his own preaching in Corinth, "And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, *and Him crucified*" (1 Corinthians 2:1, 2; emphasis mine). Even though Paul knew that the message about the cross was offensive to many, he knew that he had nothing to say that was of any eternal value except the word of the cross.

It is no different today. The message of salvation from sin, of eternal life with God, of all the spiritual blessings that God has to offer, is the message that God's Son died for us on a cross. As much as we might be repulsed by the thought of the terrible death Jesus experienced, we must "cling to the old rugged cross" as our only hope. "To us who are being saved, it is the power of God."

THE SOURCE OF OUR SALVATION

But why the cross? Why was such a terrible sacrifice necessary? Why could there not be some other way?

The answer to the necessity of the cross is twofold. First, it demonstrates *the enormity of our sin*. When we have trouble accepting the reality and necessity of the cross, it is because we are not deeply impressed with the depth of our own sinfulness. If we realized how sinful we are, we would not balk at the idea that it would take the death of God's Son to save us. It took the cross to atone for our sins. Since we are not guilty of petty wrongs, there can be no petty atonement! Isaiah had foretold that it would be so:

Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him (Isaiah 53:4-6).

Paul echoed this great prophecy: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). In Romans 3:23-25, he declared that we "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Therefore, we can only be justified by God's grace. This grace has been demonstrated in the putting forth of Jesus as an "expiation"—a sin-offering.

Without the all-powerful atonement afforded by the sacrifice of Jesus, there could be no salvation for sinners such as we are. Once we realize our own sinfulness, we have little trouble accepting the necessity of the cross.

Second, it demonstrates *the enormity of Christ's love*. How amazing it is that anyone could love anyone so much as to experience the agonizing death of the cross, or that God could possibly love us enough to allow His Son to experience it. Yet Jesus did.

For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:6-8).

Paul personalized the love of Christ when he realized that He did not just die for the sins of the whole world, but that he died for Paul:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me (Galatians 2:20).

In order to truly appreciate the cross, we need to see it as the sacrifice of God's Son "for me."

CONCLUSION

In John 12:32, Jesus said that when he was lifted up on the cross, He would "draw all men" to Himself. The cross has a drawing power that cannot be denied. It is a lovely message of self-sacrifice for others who in no way deserve it. That message is the only power in the universe that can melt a sinful heart and bring us to God. Have you been drawn yet?

—Tommy South