

Today's sermon is entitled simply, "The Cross!" Before Jesus the cross was despised, a symbol of the worse kind of cruelty and horrific barbarity imaginable. Its sole purpose was to execute offenders in the most hideous and protracted means, producing the greatest amount of pain and agony over an extended time. Many a criminal hung for days or even a week before the ordeal, to which now was added thirst and starvation and delirium finally prevailed in death. Victims were executed publicly and often left upon the cross until their bodies literally rotted away as a ghastly sign to warn all who passed by. Most sensitive people would not even look upon a cross or mention it in conversation, such was the terror and shame it evoked. Cicero, the Roman lawyer and Senator referred to it as "most extreme form of punishment," He called it "atrociously cruel," not only in the physical pain it inflicts, but equally in the humiliation it brings to the man crucified. He said;

"The very word 'cross' should be far removed, not only from the person of a Roman citizen, but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears. For it is not merely the actual occurrence of these things but the very mention of them that is unworthy of a Roman citizen or a free man."

But, after Jesus, the cross became the symbol of unconditional love, such sacrifice and forgiveness that it came to represent the whole Christian faith. It went from an article of shame and reproach to pride and praise among the faithful. Where once people might not speak of it, Christ's followers, like Paul would proclaim in Galatians 6:14;

"But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."

And hymn writers like Issac Watts would pen;

"When I survey the wondrous cross on which the prince of glory died..."

Jesus brought change to the cross, from being despised to boasting, from shameful to wonderful. Far more was happening here than just a crucifixion. It was at once a battle scene, a judgement seat, a sacrificial altar, a vehicle of love, all in one.

Once again, Luke's account tends to be short. We have other details provided in the other gospels. Matthew and Mark record the abuse by the Roman soldiers, the flogging and crown of thorns. It is after that scourging, which often was severe enough to cause death in itself, that Jesus is taken out to be crucified. Verse 26 begins;

"When they led Him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, coming in from the country, and placed on him the cross to carry behind Jesus."

Executions were held outside the holy city of Jerusalem. It was custom for the criminal to carry their own means of death to the chosen spot, the last indignant act. It was either the entire cross or just the crossbeam carried across the shoulders. The scourging Jesus endured nearly killed him, as was the intent of such a beating. The damage to his flesh and the profuse bleeding weakened him. As Isaiah 52:14 predicted;

“Just as there were many who were appalled at him-his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and His form marred beyond human likeness-“

Nearing collapse, the soldiers press into service, “seized” indicates grabbed hold of, one, Simon of Cyrene. We have only a little tantalizing information about this Simon. Because of this, many opinions circulate about who he is and what happened to him. He came from Cyrene which is on the northern coast of Africa in modern day Libya. For this reason some conjecture that he was black. The fact that it was an indignity to carry a cross might explain why Simon was seized out of the crowd if he was black perhaps thinking he was a slave. That is a possibility, but history shows not all blacks were slaves and that there was a very large Jewish community settled in that area for a long period of time. His children are mentioned elsewhere as in Mark.15:21;

“They pressed into service a passer-by coming from the country, Simon of Cyrene (the father of Alexander and Rufus), to bear His cross.”

His sons names are Greek names, so he could have been a Jew making pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover. It is unusual to identify a man by mentioning his sons, unless his sons are better known than he. This is a possibility as well since Paul writing in Romans 16:13 states;

“Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too.”

So Rufus may have been prominent in the church at Rome and his mother, which would have been Simon’s wife, extended some motherly care to Paul. Some contend that Simon took pity on Jesus and willfully accepted the cross, but the text states he was forced to carry it. Some claim he became a Christian through the incident of carrying the cross and went to Rome to join the church there. But as I said, these are interesting possibilities, we must leave them as possibilities only. The text continues in Luke 23:27;

“And following Him was a large crowd of the people, and of women who were mourning and lamenting Him. ²⁸ But Jesus turning to them said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.’ ³⁰ Then they will begin TO SAY TO THE MOUNTAINS, ‘FALL ON US,’ AND TO THE HILLS, ‘COVER US.’ ³¹ For if they do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

Luke is the only gospel writer to record this incident and we are not surprised because of how he has highlighted women throughout his gospel. The women are not identified but appear supportive of Jesus. “Daughters of Jerusalem” is a neutral designation and they could represent the general population of the city, or at least the women of the city. Yet, Jesus, even with his life ebbing away, pauses and turns towards them. He gives them a concerned warning. It is a warning of the coming destruction and their fate. It is another reference to the 70AD destruction. That would be first such a horror of being surrounded and facing the disease and starvation that would drive some women to cannibalize their own infants, followed by the slaughter of women and children by the Roman soldiers who ravaged the city, that they would be better off not to have had children.

Only three times in Scripture is the saying, about mountains and hills, to cover us. The first was in Hosea 10:8 which spoke of the appalling divine judgment upon Samaria. In that ghastly conquest the people would yearn, but in vain, for the mountains to crush them swiftly. The second mention is right here in Luke and points to the coming 70AD destruction. The third occurrence is found in Revelations 6:16-17 which reads;

“and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; ¹⁷ for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?””

The historian Josephus wrote of that 70AD destruction when General Titus crucified so many fugitives from the city that neither...

“space for the crosses, nor crosses for the bodies could be found.”

Jesus continues and mentions the proverbial saying;

“If people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

In other words, if people, who have before them the living Son of God, and reject him, what will happen to them when He is gone and they are dried by disbelief? The dry wood will be ripe for burning.

Remember, back at Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, in Ch.19:44, he wept because he foresaw the coming destruction because the people;

“and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation”

The account continues introducing two other characters;

When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left...

Let’s move down to verse 39;

v.39 - One of the criminals who were hanged *there* was hurling abuse at Him, saying, “Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!” ⁴⁰ But the other answered, and rebuking him said, “Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹ And we indeed *are suffering* justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴² And he was saying, “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!” ⁴³ And He said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.”

The first thief illustrates how hard and blind the human heart can be. This thief spoke to Jesus with the same insulting sarcasm and biting words as those who stood about. This thief demanded Jesus to perform a miracle. His outlook was much like Herod’s who wanted Jesus to perform. He shows no fear

of God, lacks all remorse for his sins, does not plead for forgiveness and mentions no word of faith. This unrepentant, unbelieving thief would die in his sins and end up in hell.

But there was a second thief also. According to Matthew 27:44, he too reviled Jesus at first, so they both started at the same point. But at some point this thief was touched by God's quickening grace, his heart softened and repentance and faith were brought forth. At that moment of quiet conversion he rebuked the first thief. He showed a degree of reverence for God the first thief lacked, "Do you not fear God?" He admitted he and the other thief were dying as punishment for their crimes. But, perhaps in hearing the seven last words of Jesus from the cross, he realized Jesus was innocent and trusted in the claim that Jesus was the Messiah. So, on the brink of death, this thief humbly asked for mercy.

v.42 "And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!"

Jesus heard that request of faith expressed in a believing anticipation of life hereafter, as He hears every and all prayers from a genuine repentant heart and assures the thief;

v.43 "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."

Talk about a "death bed" conversion! But notice how gracious God was towards this thief. I like what Dr. Philip Ryken wrote here about this thief. He said;

"It might be better, therefore, to call him the convert on the cross." Or maybe we should call him the 'luckiest man alive,' because at the time he was crucified, he was well on his way to hell. But of all the criminals on all the crosses outside all the cities in the entire Roman Empire, the man happened to get crucified next to Jesus...How "lucky" can a man get? So "lucky" that he is still alive today in paradise!"

Of course Dr. Ryken doesn't believe in luck, but providence and that God works, as Paul writes in Ephesians 1:11;

"also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will,"

This example shows that, in His Almighty yet invisible hand, when it comes to the salvation of God's elect, He will orchestrate heaven and earth, empires and governments, schedules and agendas, friends as well as enemies, both the means and the end, to assure his chosen are saved!

Proverbs 21:1 affirms this;

"The king's heart is *like* channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes."

Jesus said in John 6:39;

"This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day."

God's purpose cannot be thwarted.

Moving back up to V. 34. The soldiers cast lots, played dice for Jesus clothes. The truth is that criminals were stripped naked, the final humiliating indignation, before they were crucified. We always see pictures and statues of Jesus on the cross with a loincloth for modesty purposes, but the reality was he was naked. When they crucified Jesus we know he spoke from the cross. Those phrases have become known as the “seven last words of Christ.” The first phrase is recorded here;

“But Jesus was saying, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves.”

Unimaginable grace! To ask for mercy upon those who had crucified him is nearly beyond our comprehension. With your minds eye “look” and “listen” to them standing before the cross.

“And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, “He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One.”

³⁶The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, ³⁷and saying, “If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!” ³⁸Now there was also an inscription above Him, “THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

Matthew adds in ch27:39-43;

“And those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads ⁴⁰and saying, “You who *are going to* destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” ⁴¹In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking *Him* and saying, ⁴²“He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe in Him. ⁴³HE TRUSTS IN GOD; LET GOD RESCUE *Him* now, IF HE DELIGHTS IN HIM; for He said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”

How remarkable are Jesus’ words here. Spurgeon writes;

“See ye not what a great heart is here revealed! What a soul of compassion was in the Crucified! How Godlike, how divine! Was there ever such a one before him, who, even in the very pangs of death, offers as his first prayer an intercession for others?...and as Christ has set before you this paragon of unselfishness, seek to follow him, treading in his steps.

There is, however, a crowning jewel in this diadem of glorious love. The Son of Righteousness sets upon Calvary in a wondrous splendor; but amongst the bright colors which glorify his departure, there is this one—the prayer was not alone for others, but it was for his cruellest enemies. His enemies, did I say, there is more than that to be considered. It was not a prayer for enemies who had done him an ill deed years before, but for those who were there and then murdering him. Not in cold blood did the Savior pray, after he had forgotten the injury, and could the more easily forgive it, but while the first red drops of blood were spurting on the hands which drove the nails; while the hammer was stained with crimson gore, his blessed mouth poured out the fresh warm prayer, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

And how ignorant they were. Everything they said about Jesus was true, but they pronounced it in sarcasm and mockery. They railed at him that if he was the “Messiah” the “Chosen one” “King of the Jews” “King of Israel” “Son of God” and they challenged him to “save.” In the greatest irony, what they were convinced was impossible that Jesus could save himself and others on that cross, in fact, that was exactly what he was accomplishing!” But spiritually dead and blind people think they know better than God how things should be done. They who were so concerned about being ceremonially clean for the Passover, never realized they were killing THE Passover Lamb of God!

At about the sixth hour to the ninth hour, that’s from noon to 3pm, darkness settled upon the land. At some point, as death approached Jesus, the curtain in the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom as Matthew records. This had tremendous significance. The veil separated the holy place from the inner, most holy of holies inside the Temple. It hid a holy God, who dwelt above the mercy seat on the Ark of the Covenant, from sinful people on the outside. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest parted this veil and entered the holy of holies in the presence of God. Sin is such a serious matter that if all preparations were not carried out to the letter, the high priest would die. When Jesus died on the cross, God tore the veil in the Jerusalem temple from top to bottom. No one but God could have done such a thing because that veil was 60 feet tall and as thick as a man’s handbreadth or about 4 inches. The direction of the tear meant God alone destroyed the barrier between himself and humanity, an act only God had the authority to do.

The tearing of the temple veil meant God pointed to the royal priesthood of believers (1 Peter 2:9). Every believer in Christ could now approach God directly, without any mediator except Christ. Christ, the great High Priest, intercedes for us before God. Through the cross, all barriers have been destroyed. Through the Holy Spirit, God dwells once more with and in his people. The writer of Hebrews states the wonderful consequences this way in ch. 10:19-23;

“Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, ²¹ and since *we have* a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled *clean* from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful;”

Every Believer in Christ now has direct access to God! No rituals, no priests, not the Virgin Mary, no intermediary is needed now but Christ alone!

At this moment, Jesus speaks the last of his seven sayings;

“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

The blood lust of the crowd was satisfied. Satan and his demons celebrated. Together they felt they had triumphed-“We will not have this man as king!” Satan might be saying, “I offered him the kingdoms of this world if he would worship me, but now he is dead without a kingdom.”

The words "Into your hands I commit my spirit," come from Psalms 31:5 and were the common words of prayer that every Jewish mother would teach their children when they went to bed at night, "Into your hands I commit my spirit." But Jesus makes it personal and intimate by adding the word, "Father." Jesus had finished the work His Father had given Him to do and now would taste death, fully trusting in His Father's loving purpose for Him. In Acts 2:23 clearly states;

"this *Man*, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put *Him* to death."

They meant it for evil, but God designed it for good! All the forces of evil, both worldly and spiritually, failed to see the victory in the cross!

The other gospels record that together with the unnatural darkness, there was an earthquake. These phenomena awakened the Roman Centurion to acknowledge Jesus as a righteous man. Matthew records the Centurion adding, "Surely he was the Son of God!" The crowd, now terrified by these events, beat their breasts a sign of anguish or grief, fled.

Only John and Mary remained at the cross. Some women followers were observers from afar.

After Jesus died, Joseph of Aramathea went to ask Pilate for the body. This was a bold and potentially dangerous move. He could have been seen as a partner with Jesus in some sort of uprising. He certainly would incur the wrath of the Sanhedrin. He was not present when the Sanhedrin "voted" and was probably not informed of the night time meeting.

There was haste involved in the burial as the Sabbath was about to begin. They placed Jesus in a newly cut tomb, with some preliminary anointing. Then they went home for the Sabbath to prepare.

Jesus was not the only man to be crucified. It was an ancient form of punishment dating back to the Egyptians, but commonly used by Rome. No Roman citizen could be crucified. The punishment was reserved for slaves who rebelled, insurrectionist and prisoners of war. When the famous Spartacus lead his slave revolt, after brief success, he and 6,000 of men were crucified along the Appian Way by Rome as an example.

But Jesus alone could change the meaning of the cross from a despised vehicle of a ghastly death to the precious symbol of glorious life. The cross remains foolishness and holds the fragrance of death to those who are perishing. As Paul laments in Philippians 3:18-19;

"For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, *that they are* enemies of the cross of Christ,¹⁹ whose end is destruction, whose god is *their* appetite, and *whose* glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things."

But to those who are being saved it is the power of God and the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ and of life. Jesus died as a substitute, in the place of sinners who deserved that death, and offers forgiveness and new life in Him.

The cross is central to the Christian life. Like Simon of Cyrene we are to “deny ourselves and pick up our cross’ and follow Jesus. That means every day we are to put to death anything that would rise up to break off communion with Christ, or our ability to love one another.

Like the thief on the cross, no matter what one’s past sins, no matter how close death might be, turning to Christ in repentance and faith secures salvation. Whenever we may feel or if we hear someone say, “It’s too late for me,” point them to the cross upon which their Savior hung and they can find forgiveness and salvation even at the midnight hour!

Through the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross forgiveness could be found between God and humanity. In Ephesians 2:15-16 we read of God’s intent;

“by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, *which is* the Law of commandments *contained* in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, *thus* establishing peace,¹⁶ and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.”

But God expects that offer of forgiveness to be extended between people who are at odds, as were the Jews and Gentiles. The cross was meant to put to death that hostility. Colossians 3:13 encourages believers;

“bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.”

Forgive as the Lord forgave you! If Jesus can ask His Father to forgive those who were crucifying him at that moment, how can we, as His followers not extend forgiveness to others over some hurt, some offensive word or insensitive deed? Let us not be like the unmerciful servant Jesus spoke of in Matthew 18. That servant owed an impossibly enormous debt, one he could never repay, was forgiven by his master. But he in turn turned on one of his servants and for a very small debt, threw him into prison. When news returned to the master he called that servant to account. Jesus ended that parable;

“Then summoning him, his lord said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.’³³ Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’³⁴ And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him.³⁵ My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.”

Rather, as the family of God, let us follow our Master, picking up our cross, crucifying our anger and unforgiving spirits, and let us live a life of sacrificial love and forgiveness seeking to live in peace with one another.

Father God in Heaven I pray that you would give us the courage and strength to be like your Son. Father fill us up with your love, mercy, and forgiveness. If there is someone in our life we need to forgive weigh on our hearts that we would bring glory to you in our forgiveness. Lord I pray for continued growth and knowledge of your will for us! I thank you Lord for all you do you. You are truly an Awesome God. I pray all these things in the name of your son, Jesus. AMEN