

CRUEL CRUCIFIXION

When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha. Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, "Here is your King!" They cried out, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but the emperor." Then he handed him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written." When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it." This was to fulfill what the scripture says, "They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing

they cast lots.” And that is what the soldiers did. Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), “I am thirsty.” A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, “It is finished.” Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit (John 19:13-30).

As news of Jesus’ fate spread through Jerusalem, a vast crowd gathered and followed Him along the way to Calvary. When He passed the gate into Pilate’s court, they placed on His bruised and bleeding shoulder the cross that had been intended for Barabbas. But the weight of a cross was more than Jesus could carry. He hadn’t eaten since the Passover supper with His disciples on Thursday evening. Then He had battled with Satan in Gethsemane, suffered the betrayal of Judas, watched His disciples desert Him and flee, stood before Annas, Caiaphas, Pilate, and Herod, and twice endured lashes on His back. When they put the cross on His shoulder, He collapsed. It was more than any human being could bear.

Mary, in the company of John, saw her Son collapse. She longed to take His wounded head in her hands and wipe the brow that had once rested on her breast. But she could not.

At that moment a Cyrenian, Simon, arriving from the country, found himself surrounded by the crowd. He heard the mocking cry, “Make way for the King of the Jews!” Amazed at the unbelievable cruelty and hostility, he stopped to express compassion for Jesus. The soldiers seized him, placed Jesus’ cross on his shoulders, and forced him to carry

it all the way to Calvary. For the rest of his life Simon looked back on that event as a privilege that led him to take up the cross of Christ from choice.

The women in the crowd watched the developments with intense interest. Some of them had seen Jesus when they'd brought loved ones to Him for healing. They were astounded at the hatred displayed by the angry mob, for their own hearts were breaking in sympathy for Him. As Jesus fell fainting beneath the cross, the women gasped and cried out in empathy. Their mournful wails were all that Jesus noticed as He staggered along. Despite His intense suffering as He carried the sins of the world, He looked up at these women with compassion. They were not His disciples. They weren't crying for Him as God's Son, but they openly showed their feelings of pity for Him. Jesus noticed. Though He appreciated their sympathy, His greater concern was for their future. Where would they be for eternity?

Arriving at the place of execution, the three prisoners were bound to their torture stakes. Both thieves resisted and had to be wrestled onto their crosses, but Jesus offered no resistance. Mary, supported by John, watched, hoping that somehow Jesus would demonstrate His power and free Himself. At the same time His words describing the very scene she now witnessed came into her mind.

Mary's mind swirled with many questions. Would her Son, who had raised the dead, allow Himself to be crucified? Would she have to give up her belief in His Messiahship? Was there no way for her to reach out and give Him some comfort? She watched each step in the cruel process until she saw the soldiers take His hands and drive spikes through them. At that she fainted and had to be carried away.

Through the entire ordeal Jesus never spoke a word of complaint. He breathed only this compassionate prayer: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are

doing” (Luke 23:34). The prayer He offered that day included every person in the world, from creation to the end of time. We all bear guilt for the crucifixion of Jesus, but Jesus offers us forgiveness so we can experience peace now and claim His promise of eternal life.

After the soldiers had nailed Jesus to His cross they lifted it up and dropped it violently into place. This caused Jesus the most intense physical agony. They nailed a sign above His head that read, in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin: “Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews.” Providentially, through that sign thousands of visitors from the surrounding countries who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover feast heard for the first time the truth about Jesus.⁷²

In a small gesture of humaneness, Romans soldiers were permitted to give a drug to the victims of crucifixion to diminish some of their excruciating pain. When they offered it to Jesus, however, He tasted it and refused it. He would not allow His mind to be dulled in this way. His mind must remain clear to find strength to hold on to God through faith.

Ridicule continued as the day wore on. The religious leaders joined the mob in mocking Jesus with cruel taunts: “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” “He saved others; he cannot save himself” (Matthew 27:40, 42). Their taunts contained a cruel truth—Jesus could have taken Himself down from the cross, but had He done so and saved Himself, He could not have saved sinners.

Throughout His agony, Jesus found comfort in one brief conversation, initiated by a request from the repentant thief beside Him. When the soldiers bound the thieves to their crosses, both of them had ridiculed Jesus, but as the hours passed, a change came over one of them. This man was no hardened criminal. Earlier in his life he had seen Jesus’ ministry and had been convicted by what he heard. But those convictions were diminished by the accusations of the priests.

Led on by a poor choice of friends, he immersed himself in a life of sin that ended in his arrest, trial, and sentence to die.

While most people in the crowd at Calvary ridiculed Jesus, there were some who heard and recalled His words and deeds of compassion and quietly defended Him. As the thief heard these people talk, it reawakened his earlier convictions. Turning to the other thief, he asked, "Don't you fear God, seeing you're suffering the same fate?" The dying thieves had nothing more to fear from human beings, but what about God and the judgment? The repentant thief moaned that they were receiving the results of their criminal lives, but looking at Jesus, he exclaimed: "This man has done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:41).

The more the thief thought about it, the more his doubts began to evaporate. He recalled all he had heard about Jesus, remembered those He had healed, those whose sins He had forgiven. He glanced at Jesus' friends weeping below him, read the sign above Jesus' head, and, little by little, the Holy Spirit brought the chain of evidence together. He recognized in Jesus the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. In a strange mixture of hope and fear, the thief reached out to Jesus and begged, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom" (verse 42, NKJV). Instantly he heard this astounding assurance: "You will be with me in paradise" (verse 43).

As Jesus also looked over the crowd below Him, He noticed His mother and John. Sensing the end for Jesus was near, John had brought her back to the cross. As He approached death, Jesus thought of the needs of His mother. Looking into her grief-stricken face, and then at John, He said to her, "This is your son." Then to John He charged, "This is your mother!" John fully understood the significance of those words, and he took Mary to his home, where he cared for her for the rest of her life.

While carrying the awful weight of the guilt of the world, Jesus was deprived of His Father's presence. That terrible deprivation in His time of ultimate anguish pierced His heart with a sadness that no human being can comprehend. The pain of the separation from His Father eclipsed even His extraordinary physical pain. During those lonely hours Jesus feared that sin was so offensive to His Father that They would be separated forever. In the end that sense of the Father's intense anger over the sins of the world that Jesus carried as our Substitute broke His heart. In this experience Jesus felt the same anguish every unrepentant sinner will feel at the end of time when God's mercy has been withdrawn from the world.

Even the sun refused to witness this tragic scene. At mid-day darkness enveloped the cross for about three hours. In the eerie darkness lightning occasionally flashed, illuminating the cross and the Crucified. In these strange and unexplained demonstrations of nature, religious leaders, executioners, and the milling crowd imagined that their time of punishment for what they had done had come. Then about 3:00 they heard Jesus cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).

Visualize the scene. The sinless Son of God hangs, dying, on a cross. His back is shredded from being lashed twice. His hands that had continuously reached out to bless others are nailed to the wooden bars. His feet that had walked tirelessly on missions of love are also nailed. His royal brow is punctured by the thorns that form a mocking crown. And He suffers it all without the sustaining presence of His Father. Never forget that it is for you that Jesus agreed to bear this unbelievable burden of guilt! He died to open the gates of Paradise for you!

Late on that blood-soaked Friday afternoon a voice is heard from the central cross. In perfect clarity that all at

Calvary could hear, Jesus announced, “It is finished” (John 29:30). He added, “Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit” (Luke 23:46, NKJV). At that moment a strong light circled the cross, and Jesus’ face shone as bright as the sun. Then His head dropped . . . and He died.⁷³