

SERMON: THE THREE CROSSES

Luke 23:32-33

(32) And there were also two other, malefactors, led with Him to be put to death. (33) And when they were come to a place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.

Introduction

Crucifixion was indisputably one of the cruelest and most barbaric forms of punishment in the ancient world. Flavius Josephus, the Jewish historian, described crucifixion as “the most wretched of deaths.” It was viewed with such horror that Seneca, the Stoic philosopher, wrote in a letter to his friend, Gaius Lucilius, that suicide was preferable to crucifixion. Tacitus, the Roman historian, recorded how centurions and other military leaders would get into serious trouble and their careers would be stalled or terminated if the crucifixions they supervised were not brutal enough. They were not allowed to show any mercy, even if the individual was found guilty beyond question.

Crucifixion was reserved for the most serious offenders, usually for those who had committed some kind of treason or who had participated in or sponsored state terrorism. Because Israel hated the occupying Romans troops, insurrection frequently arose among the populace. As a deterrent to stop people from participating in revolts, crucifixion was regularly practiced in Jerusalem. By publicly crucifying those who attempted to overthrow the government, the Romans sent a strong signal of fear to those who might be tempted to follow in their footsteps. Romans had a ritual in which they would parade the victim to be crucified around town as he carried his own cross beam. This was similar to our contemporary “perp walk.”

Crucifixion was utilized by the Phoenicians and the Persians, but was brought to its highest level of brutality by the Romans. At first, crucifixion was carried out only on slaves and prisoners captured in war. By the first century B.C., the Romans had forged it into a horrifying means of executing criminals, rebels, and unruly slaves. Because of its torturous nature, a Roman citizen could not be legally crucified. It was too brutal. This is why Apostle Paul was beheaded on Nero’s chopping block rather than crucified.

It is easy to romanticize the crucifixion because we are, historically, so far removed from it. Our fore-parents understood it perhaps more than many others. They compared the crucifixion to a lynching, with which they were very familiar. This was expressed explicitly in the spiritual, ***Were You There?*** One repeated line tells it all: “Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.” Trembling upon the thought of a past horrific experience is one of the classic symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD). Forced to watch another slave being lynched was a traumatic experience for the onlooker. It was a sight they would never forget. I know this is depressing, but sometimes we can get totally into the theology of the crucifixion and forget about the

physiological, the psychological, and the sociological implications. During crucifixion, the victim's shoulders would eventually be dislocated and pop out of joint. Soon the out-of-joint shoulders were followed by the elbows and wrists. Then the process of asphyxiation would begin. Due to the loss of blood from the scourging and hyperventilation, the victim would begin to experience severe dehydration and would beg for water. After several hours of this torment, the victim's heart would begin to fail. Next, his lungs would collapse and excess fluids would begin filling the lining of his heart and lungs, adding to the slow process of asphyxiation. (Please remember, I left out a lot of the gory details. This is the condensed version.) To say that crucifixion was horrible is a blatant understatement.

Jesus Christ was crucified, but He was not crucified alone. He was one of three who were crucified on that awful day. The crosses were the same and the methods were the same-yet how vast a difference in these three crosses. On this communion day, let's look at these three crosses.

Exposition

1. There Was The Cross Of Rebellion.

(Luke 23:39.)

2. There Was The Cross Of Repentance.

(Luke 23:40-42.)

3. There Was The Cross Of Redemption.

(Luke 23:43.)

Closing Thoughts

Joseph Sittler, the eminent Lutheran theologian, said that a cross is not a pretty symbol. A circle has a satisfying sense of completeness. A curve has a certain gracefulness about it. A cross, however, does not proceed in any one direction. It starts upward, but the horizontal cross beam contradicts the vertical projection. It is amazing that a circle is not the symbol of God's love. Neither is a curve. Rather, an ugly, rude, crude, cruel cross is God's mark of love, redemption, and restoration. It took an ugly act to save us from our ugly sins. The hymn writer said it best:

“On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,
The emblem of suffering and shame;
And I love that old cross,
Where the dearest and best
For a world of lost sinners was slain.
So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,
Till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross,

And exchange it some day for a crown”

Thank God for the third cross!

Give God Glory! Give God All the Glory!

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