

The Meaning of the Cross (Four Views)

Intro: The cross of Jesus is the centerpiece of Christianity. It is on the banner that is raised above us, as we, like an army, go out into the world. We gather in our assemblies and sing about it! We remember it each first day in the Lord's Supper as we eat bread and drink the fruit of vine, proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes. We want to tell others about it; and like Paul we glory in what it means to us, saying with him, "May it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world" (Gal. 5:14). Tonight I am asking you to take a fresh view of the cross as we talk about the meaning of the cross.

Have you ever stopped to think about how the crucifixion might have been viewed by those who were there, who actually experienced it? Have you consider what the cross meant to all those who looked on the day the Lord was crucified? For a few moments I want you to join with me as we attempt to look through the eyes of those present that day. I would like to give you four views of the cross and as we do I hope we can see that the cross meant different things to those who looked on that day!

The View From Around the Cross (Mt., Mk., Lk. & John)

The view from around the cross was very different. Over the past three years thousands of people had come to know Jesus. Many of them were represented there that day; but their views were often very different. Some of them had come to believe in Him and thought he was the Christ; others thought he was an imposter worthy of death. All of these people had an interest in the crucifixion; look now and see first the scene through the eyes of:

Those who loved Jesus.

There was Mary, Jesus' mother, Mary's sister and Mary Magdalene and John who stood near the cross (Jn. 19:25). They saw it all up close. Can you imagine what it was like to look at the crucifixion through a mother's eyes?

Perhaps her mind went back to that glorious day when the angel Gabriel first appeared to her with the good news that she would be blessed to bear the child who would save the world, giving him a name that constantly reminded her of that fact. She could remember him as a little boy and then as a young man, the perfect son; never a moments grief, always compliant, always obedient and respectful. He had done so much for people and now this?! Is this what "Jesus" (Savior) meant? Perhaps she remember the day that she and Joseph had taken him into the temple to say to the Lord, "thanks for giving him to us, we know he belongs to you but we would like to keep him for a while, so we shall redeem him and raise him to serve you". But today Mary has come too realize the full

significance of what may have been for her a daunting memory. The prophet Simeon had said to Mary that day "a sword shall pierce your soul" (Lk. 2:34).

It must have been a scene of unbelievable pain for Mary; when the nails were driven into his hands, that sword was thrust into her heart! To Mary the cross meant the loss of one of most precious things in her life. It meant agonizing questions, "Why did this have to happen to my son?"

And then standing at a distance a multitude of acquaintances and disciples (Lk. 23:49). They too were broken hearted. We'll probably never know how difficult it was for them to see Jesus die. Can you imagine what it would have been like to be one of those disciples? To have known Jesus intimately, to have traveled with him virtually every day, to have prepared his food, to have heard his teaching, to have known his sincerity and his kindness toward others in the many healings he performed. They had invested everything in his promises! Can you imagine how desperate, fearful, confused, despairing and hopeless they were? They too must have asked the same question we ask in the face of tragedy, "Why", looking for some meaning in it all, and finding none. Three days after Jesus' death one of the disciples on the road to Emmaus summarized the thinking of those who loved Jesus. "We were hoping..." (Lk. 24:21). For these loyal disciples the cross meant confusion and dashed hopes.

Those who hated Jesus.

For all those who loved him there were also those who were passionate with indignation. They had religious reasons for wanting Him dead. They thought He was a false Christ and that His teaching would lead to the destruction of the nation.

Perhaps they were thinking things like "He'll never break our Sabbath again." Perhaps they recalled all of the times he had humiliated them by pointing out the inconsistencies in their arguments and the flaws in their theology. But today they vented all the hatred and animosity they had felt for Jesus for a long time by saying every mean and hateful thing they could think of to him! Mt. 27:39-43

The cross meant a day of vengeance for those who opposed and hated Jesus. They perhaps even thought of it as a victory for the nation.

Those who did not care! (The Romans)

It was just another day's work. Since nobody cared much for criminals anyway they felt free to take whatever liberties they felt with them. After all they were the scum of the earth, weren't they? So why not rough them up a bit just for kicks? Why not make fun of them? After watching the Roman lictors tear the flesh from his back, just for fun, they put a scarlet robe on him and a crown of thorns on him in view of the charges made that he claimed to be a king; and mocked him and spat upon him (the highest indignity in Oriental life). And

now that the fun was over, they had a job to do. They probably had trained themselves not to feel anything when they drove the nails through hands and feet of their victims. They had learned to turn a deaf ear to the cries of anguish that would erupt. Upon raising the victim on the cross, they would turn their attention to the last remaining earthly belonging of Jesus, his clothes. Jn. 19:23-25. To the Romans the crucifixion meant nothing other than that another low life was getting his just desserts and they were getting paid to do a job. In this case, there was a bonus (a little cloth to be used at home in some way and maybe if lucky an extra tunic to sell or wear).

So this was the view around the cross, a confusing mixture of love and hate and callous indifference. The cross meant different things to the people who stood around the cross.

The View From the Cross (Ps. 22)

How you ever considered what the cross meant to the one dying there? Did you wonder how Jesus might have felt on the cross? Psalm 22 gives us a glimpse at the view from the cross. It is a prophetic picture given by the Spirit through David of how the crucifixion might be seen through the eyes of the one who experiences it. In those first 22 verses we see a poignant picture of the pain of the suffering Christ.

1-3 From the first disconsolate cry of anguish we sense the Lord's own anguish and yearning. The question is, "Why have you not delivered me when you heard the prayers of other righteous men who called to you? Why have I been forsaken? And yet even so, there is a constant respect for the holiness of God in all his doings.

4-6 The Psalmist pictures the sufferer as remembering how faithfully God had delivered those who trusted him; yet this time no deliverance has come. He felt he had been left to experience the full meanness of his enemies. He felt worthless and despised.

v. 7-10 Can you imagine how it felt to see the broken hearts of loyal followers? Can you imagine how it felt to see the hatred in the eyes of those you had tried to save?

v. 11-18 He felt the full physical pain of crucifixion. We may never understand the pain Jesus went through not only physically but emotionally as he felt his life pass away.

What did the cross mean to Him who suffered there? It meant unfathomable humiliation and suffering. It meant enduring the emotional pain of being the object of hatred, ridicule and scorn. It meant painful spiritual agony in the realization that this time a righteousness man would remain for a time undelivered by God and subjected to death.

The View "Beneath" the Cross

Have you ever considered what the cross meant to Satan and those who serve Him in the spirit world?

For Satan it must have been a moment of great victory. For centuries Satan had worked to prevent the fulfillment of God's plan to bring a Savior into the world. At each step of the way he had worked to corrupt those who played a part in God's plan hoping to bring destruction of the nation from which the Savior was to come. And, he almost succeeded; but then there was that faithful remnant who by means of God's grace were granted forgiveness.

Finally the promised deliverer was born. He had tried to kill him at birth and not succeeded. He had tried to lure him with every possible temptation. Finally he thought, if I kill him, then all of it has been in vain. He had tried numerous other times without success to take his life. But now he had infiltrated the heart of a covetous disciple named Judas Iscariot to sell him out and marshaled the political forces of Jerusalem and Rome to do his dirty work. And now, at last he thinks, "I have won; the Christ is dead. He is in my domain now. I have power over death!"

To Satan the cross meant the final establishment of His rule over the whole world, a seeming check-mate in the ongoing battle against God. And so the whole picture is one of contradiction and confusion. The true meaning of the cross is not known until we look at:

The View Above the Cross (Is. 53)

The ultimate meaning of the cross is found in God's purpose. God had announced it in the words of Isaiah 700 years before the fulfillment.

Isaiah 53:6 It was the only solution to the sin of man.

Isaiah 53:10

In that single act, a painful as it was to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit there arose a way of redemption for sinful man.

God's justice was met out against sin.

God's mercy and grace was offered to sinners.

The cross meant the possibility of the salvation of the whole world!

The view from above clarifies all the confusion and contradiction that we see below!

God saw the rejoicing in the evil spirit world; but he also saw the ultimate defeat of Satan. Did Satan know that God would be willing to go that far to save his sinful creatures? Could he imagine such love and grace? Ironically, the event that he hoped would defeat God's plan made salvation possible forever!

God saw the wicked railing of Jesus' enemies, but he also knew that those who hated Jesus would see their joy short-lived. That day they had used the Romans to kill Jesus, but forty years later (A.D. 70) Jesus would use the Romans to kill them! (that is, those who continued in their rebellion against God.) They would crucify Jews Josephus reports until they ran of trees upon which to nail them!

God saw the grief of Mary and the disciples; but he knew that those who loved Jesus would see their despair turned into joy and hope, when on the third day he arose from the dead. And Jesus himself would see the results of his death in the many souls given to him by God as the result of his sacrifice. He would be exalted as Lord and Christ. And so it all worked out just as God had planned it; from the foundation of the world! Out of the confusion, the despair, the anger, the indifference, the chaos, comes God's purpose. There is meaning in it all. The meaning could be simply put in 5 words—"Christ died for our sins".

What is the meaning of His sacrifice?

God's love is manifest to all the world.
Satan's power over men is vanquished once and for all!
Sin's power to condemn has been removed for those who believe.
Forgiveness of sins is available to all who unite with His death!
Eternal life is the inheritance of all who are sons of God through Christ!

Conclusion: There is one other view: your view. Will you turn away in a casual indifference saying, "So what if Jesus died?" Or, will you reflect thoughtfully and believe and understand that Jesus died for you?