

14

People at the Cross

Matthew 27; Mark 15;
Luke 23; John 19

“But standing by the cross of Jesus were His mother, and His mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene” (John 19:25b).

Study the Bible reverently and honestly. Try to put the pieces together and see the whole picture that it gives of each divine episode. Be diligent. Clear your heart of all prejudice! Let God tell you what to believe. Do not try to make the Bible say what it has not said.

Our judgment of biblical characters is more a judgment of ourselves. We see ourselves in each one of them. We will find that great teachings come from people at the cross. Equally, great teachings come from people who were *not* at the cross. Keep your eyes wide open. Unanswered questions are not as dangerous as answers to questions that God does not ask.

SOME WHO WERE ABSENT

Judas. Judas was not at the cross. His story is the worst of all human stories! God does not think or act like man. No one demonstrates this more than Judas.

His name sends shudders up and down our spines.

Some suggest that God rejected Judas and that is why he betrayed Jesus. This denigrates God. God does not misuse or abuse people. Recent interpretations of this story assign to Judas a lofty cause! "He did what he did because he had a great cause in mind," they say. This cannot be! Jesus chose Judas, Judas chose Jesus, and then Judas chose to betray Jesus.

Jesus allowed Judas to approach Him and even kiss Him (Luke 22:47, 48). Through all of the arrest, Jesus was saying in several different ways, "Don't do this—run, Judas, run."

The only conclusion we can draw from this is that Judas was a successful hypocrite. The other eleven apostles would have stopped him if they had understood what he was about to do. They did not know his heart by his outward appearance. He had no horns or pitchfork. Jesus knew that Judas had allowed the devil to enter his heart, and He called him the "son of perdition" (John 17:12). John 12:4–6 says that Judas, the trusted treasurer, was a crook and had stolen from the apostles' money bag.

Satan "entered" Judas (Luke 22:3; John 13:27). A man who is made for God, if the man allows it, can be used by Satan. Jesus told Judas as he moved toward his terrible deed to "act quickly" (John 13:26–30). As a disciple, he was disloyal to his teacher. He betrayed Jesus for only a few dollars.

Few men were as blessed as Judas. He was with Jesus for three years. He had special privileges, yet he failed to benefit from them. He could not learn; he could not admit error; he could not repent. To be blunt, Judas could not accept Jesus' grace. Judas had regret from pride, not repentance through grace.

No man was ever warned as Judas was. Months before the betrayal, Jesus said, "Did I Myself not choose you, the twelve, and yet one of you is a devil?" (John 6:70). Judas may have thought that he could be forgiven, but that there was no way he could be restored as an apostle. "My brethren could never forgive me and accept me after this," he may have said to himself. Judas feared life more than death. He committed suicide—a permanent solution to a temporary problem. If Jesus could not save all those close to Him, neither can we!

The other apostles. Eleven of the twelve apostles are not seen at the cross. Judas had killed himself, and ten did not show up. Only John went the entire distance . . . and yet we have no record of him saying anything at the cross. Jesus deserved better! Would we have done better?

Even though they did not show up at the cross, Jesus still forgave and used the apostles. This gives us hope! The apostles simply fled (Matthew 26:56; Mark 14:50; see Zechariah 13:7). Faith believes that God knows what He is doing! Was the cross too much for the apostles? Did the pain and agony overcome them? The Bible does not stress the suffering that Jesus bore. It emphasizes the value of the blood, the death for our salvation, and the resurrection.

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. These three are not specifically mentioned as being at the cross, at the tomb, or in the upper room (see, for example, Matthew 27:55, 56, 61; Mark 15:40, 47; Luke 23:49, 55; 24:10; John 19:25; Acts 1:13, 14). They are not listed in Acts or in the Epistles.¹

¹The Epistles are the twenty-one books in the New Testament which were originally written as letters to Christians. They contain valuable teaching on how to live the Christian life.

These were the people with whom Jesus spent His final days. He loved them (John 11:5).

Many times, you have the least influence over those you love and those to whom you devote the most effort. Had these three already been hurt too much (John 11:1–44)? It has been noted that the resurrection of Lazarus precipitated the crucifixion of Jesus. Did they think their lives would be in danger if they stood at the foot of the cross? Was it too risky for them to stay with Jesus?

Others. Were the physical brothers of Jesus there? They were in the upper room in Acts 1, but they were not at their mother's side at the cross. John stood there, but they didn't (John 19:25–27).

Was Barabbas there? We would call him a terrorist (Mark 15:7; Luke 23:18, 19). Pilate was shocked that the Jews chose to release Barabbas rather than Jesus (Matthew 27:15–23; Mark 15:6–14; Luke 23:17–23). What do you think Barabbas should have done?

What about the many people Jesus had healed? Were they there? Were they too embarrassed or too ashamed to be present?

SOME WHO WERE PRESENT

Simon of Cyrene. When the humanity of Jesus failed, Simon was there. Jesus could carry His cross no farther, so the procession to Golgotha was interrupted (Matthew 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26).

We usually try to avoid interruptions. Some can be painful. We often think, "After this interruption, we can get back to life." No, no, no! Life is nothing but interruptions. The Gospels tell us about many interruptions in the life of Christ. On this occasion, Simon's life was interrupted too.

Simon was told to carry Jesus' cross. Here is God's providence! This man had traveled hundreds of miles on the religious pilgrimage of a lifetime. Suddenly, he was commandeered to carry a prisoner's cross.

Mark inserted an interesting parenthetical note. Simon, he said, was the father of Alexander and Rufus (Mark 15:21). He may have been the father of the Rufus whom Paul mentioned in Romans 16:13, but we cannot be sure.

Simon had no idea he would still be known today after two thousand years. Whatever his thoughts and motives were, his name will forever be in the Bible and in history. We owe Simon a debt of thanks for carrying the cross when Jesus could barely stand. The part of the cross Simon carried was the crossbeam (crossbar). Thank you, Simon. God always blesses those who assist His Son.

The women. Sympathetic, heartbroken women (Luke 23:27–31) wept for Jesus as He made His way to Golgotha. Jesus gave a frightening revelation to them. They were soon to cry for themselves. Jerusalem crucified Jesus, but God would allow Jerusalem to be destroyed by Roman conquerors (A.D. 67–70).

The women were there. They did not run. They cared. They looked on with deep feelings and emotion. Later, women helped with Jesus' burial and watched His tomb (Matthew 27:55–61; Mark 15:40–47; Luke 23:49–56). May God bless good women who love Jesus!

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was standing sorrowfully by the cross. We are not surprised that she was there. Of all people, who will be with you, no matter what? Your mother! Friends like Peter deny and scatter, but good mothers will always be there! Jesus could not abort His cross; Mary could not abandon her son. She did not fully

understand what He was doing, but she was at the foot of the cross.

Every Jewish girl prayed to be the mother of the Messiah. Mary must have been thrilled that God had chosen her to bear and rear His Son (Luke 1:26–38). She also must have been intimidated by the challenge. This was God’s only begotten Son! What was it like to rear Him? Mary paid a tremendous price to be Jesus’ mother. Simeon, the prophet, had said, “A sword will pierce even your own soul” (Luke 2:35). Only a mother can begin to imagine how Mary felt. Mary lovingly paid the price to rear Jesus. Discipleship will cost us as well. We, too, must be willing to pay the price.

Can we remotely grasp what it was like to live in the house with Jesus? It is easier to grasp His deity than His humanity. Humanly speaking, we might think that Jesus would have been an “A” student, a star athlete, the young man voted “most likely to succeed.” Mary must have wondered, “What kind of person will this child turn out to be?” (see Luke 1:66). What an experience she must have had in rearing Him!

What is the lesson here? In spiritual matters, the physical family does not count. God is not partial (Acts 10:34). There was no fanfare for the family of Jesus. Mary, Jesus’ brothers, and His sisters had to obey the gospel as others did! They had to become followers of the Christ as all do, and they did. They were present in the prayer session before the first gospel sermon was preached (Acts 1:13, 14). Joseph, the adopted father, was faithful in what he was asked to do. Mary was faithful to her Son and, later, to His church.

Mary, in hearts today, is either banished or deified. Both views are wrong. She did not receive a divinely

privileged position, but she was greatly blessed (see Luke 11:27, 28): Her Son became her Savior! (See Acts 1:14.) After the Book of Acts, Mary drops out of the Scriptures.

Other women who loved Jesus were at the cross. Mary Magdalene was there. Jesus, after His resurrection, appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom He had cast out seven demons (Mark 16:9; Luke 8:2). There was a third Mary, the mother of James and Joses (Mark 15:40). Also, Salome, the mother of James and John, was there, as was Joanna (Luke 24:10). The women from Galilee (Matthew 27:55; Mark 15:40, 41; Luke 23:49, 55) were there and stayed near the cross. Women were the last ones at the cross and the first ones at the tomb. Praise God for good women!

The thief on the cross. Read Luke 23:39–43. The thief fascinates us. Nothing exposes how we think like this thief. Are we willing to think and be intellectually honest?

The thief was saved. Jesus died *with sinners for sinners*. While on earth, He had the power to forgive sin (Matthew 9:4–6; Mark 2:8–11; Luke 5:22–24). He was dying, but He was not dead—and He gave salvation to this man.

Some cry, “The thief was too bad, too fallen, too late, and too far gone.” Let us not tell God how to dispense His grace! Let us not tell Jesus whom He can save! Why try to keep any sinner lost? Just think: The greatest day in this thief’s life was the day of his crucifixion!

“But he did nothing,” you say. Oh, but he did! He claimed the moment. He did what he could. He confessed Jesus as Lord. He rebuked the impenitent thief. He was the only person who defended Christ on the cross.

“He was saved without baptism,” you say. Maybe and maybe not! The circumstances suggest that the thief *could*

have been baptized. "All Judea" obeyed John the Baptist's baptism (Matthew 3:4–6; Mark 1:4, 5). Religious folk rejected both John and his baptism (Luke 7:29, 30). Publicans and harlots accepted John's baptism. Jesus and His apostles, later, were baptizing more people than John was (John 4:1, 2). Do not gamble your soul upon a thief who may not have been baptized. Never draw an eternal conclusion from an assumption that cannot be settled by revelation.

The thief died under the law of Moses, but we live under the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2). When the thief died, Jesus had not been raised from the dead; He had not given His Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20; Mark 16:15, 16). At this time, the Holy Spirit had not come; people had not been commanded to be baptized to become Christians. The church had not been established. (That happened on the Day of Pentecost; see Acts 2.) No one can be saved today as the thief was!

Under severe humiliation and excruciating pain, the thief did his best thinking. He rebuked the other thief for blasphemy. He confessed their guilt. He defended Jesus. He used "kingdom language." To some degree, he glimpsed the resurrection. Both the thief and Jesus were dying. Only a great miracle or a resurrection could offer any future hope to him. He did not try to manipulate Jesus as the other thief did. In his helplessness, he threw himself down before "the mercy of the court." This in no way authorizes "deathbed salvation." The thief confessed his faith in Jesus, and he who deserved hell got heaven. The cross shouted to the thief as it shouts to us: "Life is not futile . . . failure is not fatal . . . death is not final!"

The crowds. Gawkers walked by, watching and ridiculing those being crucified (Matthew 26:65–68; 27:47–49;

Mark 14:65; 15:29–36). Crosses brought out the inhumanity in man. To spectators, this was a sport—an ugly, bloody game. Experiments were encouraged: “Come down . . .”; “Stay put . . .”; “Give Him some cheap vinegar . . .”; “Maybe Elijah will come!” What a show! Today, the world is filled with protesters. Where were the protesters when they were needed? “His blood shall be on us and on our children!” the crowd had cried (Matthew 27:25). What a terrible price to pay for the conviction that they got!

The enemies. With pride they said, “We took care of that!” However, Sunday came. They had set their own trap. After the resurrection, Christianity stormed throughout the world. Biblical Judaism ended. Jerusalem was sacked in A.D. 70. What is the point? Simply this: No one can fight against God and win.

Roman soldiers. The soldiers dressed Jesus as royalty and then had a mocking party (Matthew 20:17–19; 27:27–31; Mark 10:32–34; 15:16–20; Luke 18:31–34; 23:11; John 19:1–5). Jesus was beaten severely. The soldiers gambled for His clothes (Matthew 27:35; Mark 15:24; John 19:23, 24). This added insult to injury. However, one Roman centurion watched intently. He saw that Jesus was different. He concluded, as we all must, “Truly this was the Son of God!” (Matthew 27:54; see Mark 15:39; Luke 23:47).

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus asked boldly for Christ’s body (Matthew 27:57–61; Mark 15:42–47; Luke 23:50–56; John 19:38–42). We do appreciate them, for they buried Jesus.

Too many people think the way these two men did. Too many only want to serve God in an advisory capacity. Two men who could have done so much did so little! They only claimed the dead body of a man they had secretly believed in when He was alive. Jesus asks us for

our lives; sometimes we are only willing to perfume His body! We are not told what became of Joseph and Nicodemus. Their action did take nerve, but it takes true courage to confess Jesus, to make Jesus who He is—Lord.

Some will do more for a lost cause than for a living hope. It is easier to bury the dead than to obey the living Lord.

*The cross . . .
there is no other way!*