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# Looking at God's Heart

*"And sitting down, they began to keep watch over Him there" (Matthew 27:36).  
"And the people stood by, looking on" (Luke 23:35a).*

As Jesus suffered on the cross, a handful of those who loved Him stood inconspicuously nearby—the women from Galilee; Mary, His mother; John, the beloved apostle; and a few others. Other than John, the apostles were conspicuously absent from the cross. The disciples who were near the cross at the beginning pulled back and watched from a distance until Jesus died—perhaps because of the unbearable pain of watching Him suffer or because of the mutual support they received from waiting as a group. Mark wrote, "There were also some women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the Less and Joses, and Salome" (Mark 15:40). John mentioned not only the women (John 19:25), but also "the disciple whom He loved standing nearby" (John 19:26).

Had we been among those who were standing beneath the cross of Jesus, we would have been overwhelmed by the atrocious features of His crucifixion. We would have cringed in horror as we witnessed the inhuman spectacle of three men hanging from Roman crosses by spikes in their hands and feet. Cicero said that crucifixion was a "most cruel and disgusting penalty," that it was "the worst extreme of the tortures inflicted upon slaves."<sup>1</sup> He further said that "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."<sup>2</sup> Seneca described crucifixion as

the "accursed tree,"<sup>3</sup> and Josephus called it "a most miserable death."<sup>4</sup> It was so horrible an execution that it was decreed by Rome that no Roman citizen would ever have to experience it.

Had we been at the foot of the cross, beyond being shaken to the depths of our beings by the torture of the crucifixion, we would have been appalled by the mockery of Jesus that took place. Those passing by on the nearby road, the chief priests who were following the crucifixion through to its end, the soldiers who had crucified Jesus, and even, at first, the thieves who were hanging beside Him were all lashing out at Him. With vile, wicked tongues, they poured their salty sneers into His wounds. They ridiculed His position as King, His power to work miracles, His prophecy concerning the temple of His body, and His personal relationship with God. It was unthinkable for man to crucify the Son of God; it was even worse for man to mock Him as He went through its agony.

If all we ever see at the cross is the picture of the blood, the wrenching pain, and man's unbelievable inhumanity to the Son of God, we have missed the true meaning of the cross. We must also see its spiritual dimension, draped over the scene like a cloak of God's glory. Anyone who takes the New Testament into his hands and traces the account of Jesus' death will find that what was displayed on the cross was the very heart of God. When His Son died, God

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<sup>1</sup>Cicero *Against Verres* 2.5.64, 66.

<sup>2</sup>Cicero *On Behalf of Gaius Rabirius* 5.16.

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<sup>3</sup>Seneca *Epistle* 101.14.

<sup>4</sup>Josephus *Wars* 7.6.4.

intended to display His heart publicly for the world to see.

Let us look again at the cross and permit it to take us into the heart of God.

*At the cross, we see God's heart of integrity.*

The cross stands as the fulfillment of all of the promises God had made regarding our redemption. At the beginning of time, God began to announce that He would put into place a great plan of salvation for His sinful creation. This promise has been referred to as God's oldest promise to mankind.<sup>5</sup> Paul told Titus, "In the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago" (Titus 1:2). The Greek literally means "before times eternal" (πρὸ χρόνων αἰωνίων), as the ASV renders it.

God made His promise and then repeated it every time He accepted an animal sacrifice during the two dispensations of the Old Testament (Patriarchal and Mosaical) and the sacrificial time prior to Christ's death in the New Testament. These promises were brought to their completion when Jesus gave Himself for us on the cross. This fact must be the primary meaning of Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 1:20: "For as many as are the promises of God, in [Christ] they are yes." God said "yes" to all of His promises that He had made to man in the preceding ages when Jesus went to the cross and died for our sins. His sacrifice was one of a kind (Hebrews 10:4), once for all time (Hebrews 9:28), and the one that completed all the others (see Hebrews 10:18).

*At the cross, we see God's righteous heart.*

The cross was God's way of rejecting sin and rescuing His people from evil (Galatians 1:4). It illustrates that He can never wink at sin or overlook it. God is perfectly righteous. He cannot be tempted to sin, He does not tempt anyone to sin, and He cannot allow any sin to go unpunished (James 1:13; see Exodus 34:7).

Two passages in the writings of Paul make these truths clear and show the righteous heart of God that was revealed at the cross. The first is 2 Corinthians 5:21, which says, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of

God in Him." Jesus became sin on our behalf! Can we comprehend the fact that He identified with our sin so that we might be identified with God's righteousness? These realities overwhelm us!

The second passage is Romans 3:24–26:

Being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Paul explained that the cross itself took the form of a public "demonstration" of the righteousness of God concerning sin. In this great declaration, we see God's *forbearance* regarding the sins that were committed in times past, His *forgiveness* of all sins—those past and present—through the cross, and His *future justification* of anyone who comes to Christ in obedient faith. No one can look at the cross through these two passages without seeing God's righteous heart being displayed before the world.

*At the cross, we cannot help but see God's heart of love.* Every drop of blood that fell from the cross had an eternity of divine love in it. An old illustration has someone asking Jesus, "How much do You love me?" Imagine Jesus, in response, spreading out His arms, depicting how He died on the cross, and saying, "I love you this much!" Paul expressed it this way:

For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:7, 8).

One does not have to read very far into the New Testament to realize that the heart of it is Jesus' coming into this world and giving His life as a ransom for us (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45). It has often been said, "Had you been the only one in the world who needed Jesus' blood, Jesus would have come and died for you." Paul said, ". . . I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved *me* and gave Himself up for

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<sup>5</sup>Burton Coffman, *1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, & Philemon* (Austin, Tex.: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1975), 318.

me" (Galatians 2:20; emphasis mine). John wrote, "We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us" (1 John 3:16a).

After Jesus was nailed to the cross, the soldiers who had done the work of crucifying Him sat down and kept "watch over Him there" (Matthew 27:36). They had a job to do. They watched Jesus and those around Him to make sure that His friends would not try to attack them and take His body down from the cross. Luke wrote that there were many others who "stood by, looking on" (Luke 23:35). They apparently stood around the crosses, watching what was taking place.

These people saw the blood, the savagery, the ridicule, and the suffering men—but did they see anything else? Did they behold the spiritual dimension of Jesus' death? Did they see the heart of God? What do we see when we

look at the cross? As we gaze upon that sacred tree, let us make sure that through it we are looking deeply into the heart of God.

Eddie Cloer



*The heart of the cross is not what men did to Jesus, but what Jesus did for men.*

*Jesus' suffering brings to mind Jeremiah's words as fallen Jerusalem cried out: "Is it nothing to all you who pass this way? Look and see if there is any pain like my pain" (Lamentations 1:12a).*

*"As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities" (Isaiah 53:11).*