

“RESPONSES TO THE CROSS”

I. Introduction

- A. The cross of Jesus Christ is central to the Christian faith and to the whole of history.
 - 1. Without the cross, there would be no Christianity.
 - 2. Without the cross, the entire human race would be resigned to eternal torment and despair.
 - 3. It is no wonder that John Calvin once said that “All the wisdom of believers is comprehended in the cross of Christ.”
- B. When we read the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ crucifixion, our familiarity with them can prevent us from taking the time to reflect upon the many facets of what they convey to us.
 - 1. As one writer puts it, “We are too apt to hurry past the cross, to undervalue, in spite of ourselves, the supreme mystery of the ages by a shallow assumption that we know it all. We don’t and never will. But we need to take time to learn as much as we can. We need to ‘behold,’ to ‘survey,’ to ‘stand and stare.’” [Preface to Leahy, *The Cross He Bore*, x]
 - 2. As we consider a portion of Luke’s account of the crucifixion today, we will focus our attention on how it shows us three different responses to the cross of Christ: a response of misplaced tears; a response of scornful derision; and a response of humble faith.

II. Misplaced Tears

- A. Our text begins by describing Jesus’ journey from the city of Jerusalem, where he was condemned, to the location just outside the city walls where he would be crucified.

1. A person who was condemned to death by crucifixion was also subjected to the humiliation of having to carry his own cross to the place where he would be executed on it.
 2. This was like forcing a person to dig his own grave.
 3. Jesus was not able to carry his cross all the way to the place designated for his death because he was in a weakened condition after undergoing a brutal flogging.
 4. When he stumbled under the heavy wooden crossbeam, none of the Roman soldiers would pick it up because of the shame associated with it.
 5. So they conscripted a man from the crowd, a man identified by Luke as "Simon of Cyrene," which was located in northern Africa.
 6. The fact that this man is mentioned by name, and that Mark mentions his sons by name, leads many to believe that he and his family became Christians.
 7. Perhaps the Lord used Simon's experience of literally bearing a cross for Jesus' sake to cause him to take up the cross of Christian discipleship.
- B. We cannot even begin to imagine the torment that Jesus was going through as he made his way to Golgotha.
1. He was in physical agony from the beating that he had just received.
 2. He also had to deal with the emotional devastation of Judas' betrayal, Peter's denials, and his other disciples' abandonment of him.
 3. And worst of all, he was experiencing the wrath of God as he was being made a curse on our behalf.

4. Yet in spite of all of this, Jesus is not consumed with his own suffering as he walks to the place called The Skull.
 5. He is still thinking about others.
 6. He knows that his death means doom for Israel as a nation, and this prompts him to turn to the women who were expressing their grief over the cruel treatment that he was receiving and to tell them that their tears are misplaced.
 7. While we have no reason to doubt the sincerity of their sympathy for him, he was not looking for sympathy.
 8. He wanted his fellow Jews to place their faith in him and to repent of their sins.
 9. By rejecting the Messiah, the Jews were invoking God's judgment upon themselves.
 10. They did not realize the horrors that lay ahead of them.
 11. So Jesus urges these women to weep for themselves and their children.
 12. He does not say this because he is being vindictive, but because he wants to provoke the Jews to repentance.
- C. Jesus describes the judgment that will come upon Jerusalem by saying that barrenness will no longer be seen as a sign of divine displeasure, as it generally was in that day.
1. Instead, being childless will be seen as a sign of blessing.
 2. The reason why Jesus says this is because of the terrible things that happened when the Roman general Titus laid siege to Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

3. Those who had children during those days not only had to suffer themselves, but they had to watch their little ones suffer and die.
 4. The devastation that was about to come upon Jerusalem was going to be so dreadful that people will just want to die so that their suffering can come to an end.
 5. Jesus underscores the inevitability of all of this with his proverbial saying about green wood and dry wood in verse 31.
 6. The point of this saying seems to be that if such a terrible death is coming upon this One who is without guilt and is therefore as unfit for judgment as green wood is for burning, then how much worse will it be for those who have defied God by crucifying his Messiah?
 7. We know from writers like the Jewish historian Josephus that Jesus was not exaggerating when he spoke of the atrocities that would take place in A.D. 70.
 8. It was utterly dreadful.
- D. We should also remember that, as horrific as the fall of Jerusalem was, it was only a shadowy reflection of what will take place at the final judgment.
1. Consider these thoughts from Thomas Boston on the experience of those who are condemned to an eternity in hell: "They cannot indeed be locally separated from God, they cannot be in a place where He is not; since He is, and will be present every where... But they shall be miserable beyond expression, in a relative separation from God. Though He will be present in the very centre of their souls, if I may so express it, while they are wrapped up in fiery flames, in utter darkness, it shall only be to feed them with the vinegar of His wrath, and to punish them with the emanations of His revenging justice: they shall never more taste of His goodness and bounty, nor have the least glimpse of hope from Him. They will see His heart to be absolutely alienated from them, and that it cannot be towards them; that they are the party against whom the Lord will have indignation for ever. They shall be deprived of the

glorious presence and enjoyment of God: they shall have no part in the beatific vision; nor see any thing in God towards them, but one wave of wrath rolling after another. This will bring upon them overwhelming floods of sorrow for evermore. They shall never taste of the rivers of pleasures which the saints in heaven enjoy; but shall have an everlasting winter and a perpetual night, because the Sun of Righteousness has departed from them, and so they are left in utter darkness." [*Human Nature in Its Fourfold State*, 477]

2. If we think that this sounds too severe and too cruel, then we have not really understood the cross of Christ.
3. The reason why the blessed Son of God had to be made a curse was because the sinners in whose place he died deserve to be under God's curse for all eternity.
4. Don't shed tears for Jesus.
5. Shed tears for yourself, and find consolation for your tears by looking to Jesus in faith.

III. Scornful Derision

- A. In both Jewish and Roman culture, it was customary for capital punishment to be administered outside of the city walls.
 1. This is why Jesus was executed at the place called The Skull, or Golgotha in Aramaic and Calvary in Latin.
 2. It is suggested that this place was given this name because it was a hill that looked somewhat like a skull.
 3. The fact that Jesus was crucified outside the city is theologically significant.
 4. It shows the cross to be the reality to which the Old Testament figure of the scapegoat typologically pointed.

5. We read about this in Leviticus 16, where it says that on the Day of Atonement one goat is killed as a sin offering and a second goat carries away the peoples' iniquities as it is sent off into the wilderness.
 6. In the same way, Jesus was sent out from the holy city so that our sins might be removed from God's sight.
- B. When Luke gets to the point in the narrative where he is describing the actual crucifixion of Christ, he does so in a rather matter of fact manner.
1. He simply says, "there they crucified him."
 2. The other Gospel writers do the same thing in their accounts.
 3. We know that crucifixion was a horrific way to die.
 4. As the British evangelical John Stott noted in his classic book *The Cross of Christ*, crucifixion "is probably the most cruel method of execution ever practiced, for it deliberately delayed death until maximum torture had been inflicted." [23-24]
 5. You have probably heard detailed descriptions of what happens to a human body when it is subjected to this torturous ordeal.
 6. Nevertheless, the evangelists do not relate those kinds of details to us in their accounts of Jesus' death.
 7. Not even Luke does so, and he was a doctor.
 8. Their purpose is not so much to call our attention to the physical torment that Jesus endured but to the theological meaning of his death.
- C. Luke mentions two details that mark the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.
1. First, Jesus was crucified in between two criminals.

2. This fulfills Isaiah 53:12, where it says that the Messiah “was numbered with the transgressors.”
 3. This was not because Jesus had any transgressions of his own, but because he was bearing the guilt of others.
 4. Second, the soldiers cast lots for Jesus’ clothing.
 5. This fulfills Psalm 22:18, where it says, “they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.”
 6. This underscores the fact that Jesus was robbed of everything he had, even down to the clothes on his back.
 7. He was made utterly destitute for our sake, so that through his poverty we might become rich
- D. In spite of the undeserved and cruel treatment that was directed toward him, Jesus prayed this prayer as he hung on the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.”
1. Here we see Jesus doing what he commanded his followers to do.
 2. He is loving his enemies, expressing his desire for them to be given another chance to repent.
 3. His prayer was heard.
 4. The Jews were given another forty years before God’s judgment came upon them through the Romans, and during those years the gospel was clearly proclaimed all throughout their land.
 5. Most did not embrace Christ, but thousands did.
 6. And Jesus’ prayer was not just for the Jews.
 7. It was for all of us who believe, because it was our sins that nailed him to the cross.

8. The very fact that the church exists bears testimony to the effectiveness of Jesus' prayer from the cross.
- E. It is in this part of the text that we see a second type of response to the cross, a response of scornful derision.
1. The Jewish leaders scoff at Jesus and challenge him to save himself.
 2. They have no use for a Messiah who will not use power to vindicate himself and triumph over his enemies.
 3. The Roman soldiers mock Jesus and offer him something to drink in order to prolong his suffering.
 4. Pilate makes Jesus into a ridiculous spectacle by hanging a sign over him that reads, "This is the King of the Jews."
 5. Even the criminals who were crucified on Jesus' right and left railed at him.
 6. There is considerable irony to the things that these people said as they mocked Jesus.
 7. The only way that Jesus could save others was by not saving himself.
 8. The inscription that was hung above Jesus was meant as a cruel joke, but it actually declared the truth.
 9. And as for the cry of the criminals, "Save yourself and us!", Jesus did end up saving one of them.

IV. Humble Faith

- A. This brings us to the third response to the cross that we see in our text, a response of humble faith.

1. At first, both of the criminals who were put to death alongside Jesus mocked him.
 2. But eventually, Jesus' demeanor brought one of these men to see how Jesus' innocence stood in sharp contrast to his own sinfulness.
 3. This man realized that while he was getting what his deeds deserved, Jesus was suffering unjustly.
 4. This led him to rebuke his fellow criminal, and then to turn to Jesus and say, "remember me when you come into your kingdom."
 5. He stretched out the hand of faith to Jesus.
 6. In spite of the fact that Jesus was dying on a cross, this criminal believed that Jesus would come again in glory and establish his kingdom.
 7. John Calvin's remarks on this are worth hearing: "I know not that, since the creation of the world, there ever was a more remarkable and striking example of faith; and so much the greater the admiration is due to the grace of the Holy Spirit, of which it affords so magnificent a display... that a person, ignorant and uneducated, and whose mind was altogether corrupted, should all at once... perceive salvation and heavenly glory in the accursed cross, was truly astonishing."
 8. Another thing to note about this is that only one of the criminals turned to Jesus in faith, even though they were both in the exact same situation.
 9. This attests to the sovereignty of God in saving sinners.
 10. He owes his grace to none, but he is pleased, for reasons within himself, to extend it to some.
- B. Jesus did not turn this man away when he cried out to him in faith.

1. Here is proof of what Jesus said of himself in the Gospel of John:
“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.” (Jn. 6:37)
 2. Notice also that Jesus does far more than what this man asks of him.
 3. The criminal is not going to have to wait until Jesus’ return in glory before he is welcomed into the kingdom.
 4. Instead, that very day he will be with Jesus in paradise, in the heavenly abode where all the righteous are gathered to await the last day.
 5. This gives us insight into the state of believers after their death.
 6. It is one of the texts that leads us to say that the souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness and immediately pass into glory, even as their bodies, being still united to Christ, rest in their graves until the resurrection.
 7. Another application of this text is that it refutes the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory.
 8. In the words of J.C. Ryle: “It shows clearly that no purification of any kind after death is needed for the person that dies a penitent believer. If the thief needed no purgatory, the whole doctrine of purgatory falls to the ground.”
- C. We should also note that the criminal’s salvation did not bring him relief from his physical suffering.
1. He still died the terrible death of the cross.
 2. This is a good reminder that we are never to judge our standing with God by our circumstances.

3. In his perfect wisdom, our God determines the nature, number, and duration of our afflictions.
4. He uses them as aids to our salvation, and he brings us through them all.
5. The Word of God assures us that this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

V. Conclusion

- A. This passage makes it clear that a person's eternal weal or woe is determined by his or her attitude towards the cross of Christ.
- B. Those who persist in holding the cross in derision guarantee themselves a future of unparalleled misery.
- C. But those who look to the cross in humble faith gain entry into paradise.
- D. It is no wonder that John Bunyan once wrote these words as he reflected on the cross:

*Thus far did I come laden with my sin;
Nor could aught ease the grief that I was in
Till I came hither: What a place is this!
Must here be the beginning of my bliss?
Must here the burden fall from off my back?
Must here the strings that bound it to me crack?
Blest Cross! blest Sepulchre! blest rather be
The Man that there was put to shame for me.*