

LESSON 6

The 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

The apostles. Eleven of the twelve are not seen at the cross. 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 (Zechariah 13:7; Matthew 26:56; Mark 14:50). 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 mentioned as being at the cross, at the tomb, or in the upper room (Acts 1:13, 14). They are not listed in Acts or in the Epistles. 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 that their lives would have been in danger if they had been at the cross? Did they believe that it would be too risky to stay with Jesus at the cross?

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 (John 18:39, 40). Pilate was shocked that the Jews chose to release Barabbas rather than Jesus (Matthew 27:15–22; Mark 15:6–13). What do you think he should have done?

What about the many people Jesus had healed? Were they there? Were the people of Nazareth there? Were they too embarrassed or too ashamed to be present? What about Malchus? God in His Bible gave nearly as much space to Malchus as to the initial creation of things (see John 18:1–11). God went into great detail on this: We know his name, his owner, his position, and which ear was severed (that is, the right one).

Jesus’ “motley crew” had two swords (Luke 22:38). A well-armed lynch mob confronted Jesus and His apostles in Gethsemane. They had come to arrest Him (John 18:3). When Jesus said, “I am He,” the mob drew back and fell to the ground (John 18:4–8). This is amazing and almost humorous! A hostile crowd came to arrest one peaceful prophet!

When you do not know what to do, it is best to do nothing. Peter did not think of that. He pulled out

his sword and cut off the right ear of Malchus!

Panic in the crowd could have brought death to Jesus and His group in two minutes. Peter knew how to use his sword. He knew upon whom he could use it (Malchus, a slave, not an official). He was saying, “You can kill us, but some of you will die too.” When Jesus told him to put away his weapon, Peter settled down. Jesus calmly restored the ear. There was no panic.

Here we witness the sovereign majesty of Jesus! The miracle could not be denied. The humor cannot be overlooked. Caiaphas, the high priest and Malchus’ master, had to see that ear every day.

Through this whole ordeal, Jesus guarded all of His apostles (John 17:12). “If you are seeking Me, let these go their way,” He said to the arresting party.

Judas’ part of the arrest 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 him 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 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 eleven did not have a clue about what he was doing. They would have killed 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. They said, “Is it I?” not “It is Judas” (Matthew 26:21–25). Jesus told them that His betrayer was the one to whom He would give the “morsel” (John 13:21–26). Even after Jesus dipped the morsel and gave it to Judas, the apostles still did not know what Judas was doing (John 13:21–26). However, Judas knew—and Jesus knew! Jesus knew that Judas had allowed the devil to enter his heart, and He called him the “son of perdition” (John 17:12). John later said that Judas, the trusted treasurer, was a crook and had stolen from the apostles’ money bag (see John 12:1–6).

Satan “entered” Judas (Luke 22:3; John 13:2). A man who is made for God 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. Peter could! 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.

What is the lesson for us? If Jesus cannot save all, neither can we! Jesus summed it up tersely: “It would have been good for that man if he had not been born” (Matthew 26:24b).

SOME WHO WERE PRESENT

The women. Sympathetic, heartbroken women (Luke 23:27–31) wept for Jesus as He made His way to Golgotha. Jesus gave a frightening revelation. They were soon to cry for themselves. Men could kill God’s Son, but they could not go unpunished for it. Jerusalem crucified Jesus; God allowed Jerusalem to be destroyed by Roman conquerors (A.D. 67–70).

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

Where were the men? What did they do? Fellow Jews traded Jesus’ life for that of a wretched crook,

Barabbas. A trusted apostle, Judas, betrayed Him. His main apostle, Peter, denied Him. An illegal court sentenced Him. A bunch of bullies beat Him. Hardened soldiers crucified Him.

In contrast, Mary, the mother of Jesus, was standing sorrowfully by the cross. Mothers will always be there, regardless of what happens to their sons. Perhaps she did not fully understand, but she was there.

Mary Magdalene was there. Jesus, after His resurrection, appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom He had cast out seven demons (Mark 16:9). 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; 8:3). The women from Galilee (John 19:25; Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:40–47; Luke 23:49, 55, 56; 23:27–31) 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!

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

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 a 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. Many identify him as a Christian prophet who is named as Simeon in Acts 13:1.

Consider the possibilities. There were Cyrenians in Jerusalem on Pentecost (Acts 2:10). There were preachers from Cyrene (Acts 11:20). Prophets from Cyrene were in the group called by God to start mission work (Acts 13:1–4). Did Simon later become a Christian and teach his sons, constraining them to be Christians?

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 pole for the cross was too big, heavy, and awkward to be carried. The part of the cross Simon carried was the crossbeam (crossbar). Thank you, Simon. God always blesses those who assist His Son.

The thief on the cross (*Luke 23:39–43*). The thief fascinates us. Nothing exposes how we think like this thief. Are we willing to think and be honest? When we think about him, some of us become brain-dead, and others of us become heartless. Do not abuse the thief to promote your opinions.

The thief was saved. Along with others like him—the thief was the reason Jesus went to the cross. As Jesus was dying to save *all* sinners, it was natural for Him to save *a* sinner beside Him. 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 5:23, 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 thief exposes our thinking and our level of honesty. No one knows whether or not the thief was baptized, since “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). John thundered out at the Pharisees and the Sadducees because of their rejection of his baptism (Matthew 3:7–12). The circumstances suggest that the thief *could* have been baptized. 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 in Acts 2:36, 37.) When we think of all these truths, we see clearly that 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 crowds (*Matthew 26:65–68; Mark 14:64, 65; 15:29–36*). Gawkers walked by, watching and ridiculing those being crucified. 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. Genealogies ceased. Jerusalem was sacked in A.D. 70. What is the point? Simply this: No one can fight against God and win.

Roman soldiers. Barbaric events demand barbaric people. 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; John 19:1–6). 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).

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