

Just outside the city of Jerusalem there was a hill known as Golgotha, sometimes translated as Calvary. One day three crosses were raised on this hill.

Luke gives us an account of one of the events that occurred on that day. *"Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, 'If you are the Christ, save yourself and us.' But the other, answering rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said to Jesus, 'Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.' And Jesus said to him, 'Assuredly, I say to you today you will be with Me in Paradise'"* (Luke 23:39-43).

Three crosses in a row. Usually we see only one; the one Jesus hung on, as its significance is so much greater than the other two. However, we would like to focus on all three.

THE CROSS ON THE RIGHT

On this right-handed cross we see the figure of a dying thief. He is in pain and suffering. Yet more significant than his physical anguish is his scorn and hatred for Jesus. He said, *"If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us."*

Has there ever been any "if" about it? That little "if" has enough venom in it to destroy a soul.

What had Jesus done that so aroused this thief?

Nothing that we know of. He challenged Christ to save "Yourself and us." What impudence!

What had this thief ever done that entitled him to make such a demand?

Here is a thief, within the shadow of death. Obviously his sins did not bother him even as he is about to die. How much this reminds us of those who live in sin all their lives and then when faced with death they rail at God, accusing Him of dealing harshly with them, demanding that He do something to relieve them of their situation.

His was a cross of rebellion. This cross depicts the enmity that many have toward Jesus. It typifies clearly the unbelief of the world at large toward Jesus. Thousands have perished on this right-handed cross of rebellion ever since. In spite of all that we know about Him men still reject him.

Toward the close of his gospel, John wrote: *"And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name"* (John 20:30,31).

There is enough in this one gospel written by John to produce faith in Christ, which can lead to salvation. Yet men reject Him in spite of the evidence. Jesus said, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me"* (John 14:6).

We have a clear choice. The only way to eternal life is through Jesus. If men rebel and reject Him then there is no hope. They are lost eternally having never been cleansed by His blood.

THE CROSS ON THE LEFT

Again we see the figure of a dying thief. Yet instead of dying in his sin he was dying to sin. His was a cross of repentance. This thief twists himself upon the nails to look at the centre cross, but not to scoff in unbelief, but in recognition of who Jesus was. He like the other thief would like to get his hands free, but more important to free himself from his guilt and sins.

Earlier this thief had joined with the other thief in reproaches against Christ at the beginning of the crucifixion (Matthew 27:44). But now we see in this man unfailing evidence of a great change.

As the day progresses he becomes more and more aware that this was God Himself in the person of Jesus. Notice his faith and reverence in the presence of Deity. To the other thief he said, *"Do you not even fear God?"*

There follows an immediate admission of his own guilt when he said, *"We receive the due reward of our deeds."* He expresses his belief that Jesus was suffering wrongfully *"But this Man has done nothing wrong."* Then there is his open confession of the Deity of Jesus. He calls him *"Lord."*

Finally we see genuine repentance and humility on the part of this dying thief. He says to Jesus, *"Remember me when You come into Your kingdom."* He wanted to change and be in the Lord's kingdom.

Repentance simply explained, is a change of heart. In 2 Corinthians 7:10 we learn that *"Godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation not to be regretted."* Everything about this thief indicates his regret over his sins and a desire to be with the Lord.

What a difference between these two thieves?

The first saw Jesus as only a man, the second saw Him as Lord. The first saw Jesus as a mock king, but the second saw Him as the "King of kings." The first saw him as an impostor, the second saw Him as Savior.

We can understand better now why Jesus answered him, *"Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."* Paradise is that realm in Hades where the blessed dwell between death and the resurrection.

One word of caution. The salvation of this thief occurred while the Law of Moses was still in effect. About 50 days later Christ would set in force his new covenant (law).

Today, we live under this new law, found in the N.T. Not under the Law of Moses. The terms of salvation under this new covenant require that one believe (Hebrews 11:6), repent of his sins (Acts 17:30), confess the name of Jesus (Acts 8:37), and then be baptized for the remission of one's sins (Acts 2:38).

Some have used this man to prove that one can be saved today without ever being baptized for the remission of sins. This is simply not the Lord's plan for us today.

THE MIDDLE CROSS

Here we have the cross of redemption. Jesus our Redeemer dying for the sins of the world. By his blood we can be brought back to God. Ephesians 1:7 says, *"In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace."*

It was also a suffering cross. We cannot begin to imagine the torture of those nails driven through His hands and feet. The victim of a Roman crucifixion literally suffered a thousand deaths.

There was also the shame and reproach associated with death on a cross. It was reserved for the vilest of criminals. Added to this was all the mocking and verbal abuse from the mob.

It was a vicarious cross. The thieves were suffering for their own crimes, but Jesus suffered for you and me--for our sins. He had no sin. Peter wrote, *"Who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness--by whose stripes you were healed"* (1 Peter 2:24).

Our Lord was under no obligation to pay the debt for our sins. Someone had to suffer for sin, so he was willing.

Peter reminds us, *"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit" (1 Peter 3:18).*

Why would Christ give up the glories of heaven and come down to this sinful earth to die for our sins?

Because of our utter helplessness to provide a remedy for sins. *"O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps. (Jeremiah 10:23).*

Also, He came to show us the redemptive love of God for sinful man. John says in **1 John 4:9, 10**; *"In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."*

Why was it that He alone was the only one who could die for our sins?

First, because he was spotless and able to provide the perfect sacrifice. Because as Peter writes, it had to be *"with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:19).*

Second, it was because God, the Eternal Father, appointed Him for this work. *"He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you" (1 Peter 1:20).*

In perfect obedience the Lord gave up heaven to redeem us by his death on the cross. *"Who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians. 2:6-8).*

To this middle cross each sinner today must look for salvation. There is no other way. Only the blood of Jesus can cleanse us of our sins.

Will you apply that precious blood through your obedience to the saving gospel of Christ?