

Three Crosses

Intro: Each week the central focus of our gathering is the remembrance of Jesus and what he has done for us by breaking bread together. Thus, all of us as Christians have great familiarity with the scene of Calvary as described in the gospels:

There they crucified Him, and with Him two other men, one on either side, and Jesus in between. (John 19:18)

We all know that there were three crosses on Golgotha—that of Jesus and two robbers. But have you ever wondered whether or not it was a coincidence that two other people were crucified with Jesus? Is it conceivable that an event so important in the mind of God should have a single detail not planned by God? I submit that it was no accident and that it is as important for us to consider all three crosses and those who died upon them. This I encourage you to do with me today. Look at those three crosses and see:

Three Deaths

One died in sin

One of thieves continued his life on the cross the same way he had lived his life—in sin. He lived as a sinner; he died as a sinner.

“I said therefore to you, that you shall die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you shall die in your sins.” (John 8:24)

There could be no sadder words said about any person than that; and that is exactly how that man died on the cross.

One died from sin

One of the thieves ended his life of sin on the cross. He renounced his sinful life.

But the other answered, and rebuking him said, “Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” (Luke 23:40-41)

One died for sin

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, (1 Corinthians 15:3)

Jesus, like the thieves had no sin. Thus, he could be the sacrifice for all humanity.

He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Three Attitudes

One died opposing God’s word

And one of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" (Luke 23:39)

The only words the first thief ever spoke were not intended to acknowledge Jesus but to rail upon Him. Just as He had lived his life opposing God's word, he breathed his last the same way.

One died believing God's word

And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" (Luke 23:42)

It is possible of course that all the thief knew about Jesus was the charge affixed above his head on the cross. "King of the Jews".

It seems more likely that this thief had known something about God's word.

He knew right and wrong.

He knew that Jesus was Lord.

He knew that Jesus had a kingdom.

He knew Jesus had the power to deliver Himself and the thief.

One died fulfilling God's word

The cross was not an unforeseen even in Jesus' life. He came to earth to die and in the course of time he made it clear to his disciples that he knew where his steps would lead.

From that time Jesus Christ began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day.

(Matthew 16:21)

One wonders if the last time Jesus walked out of the carpenter's shop to begin his ministry that he paused to pick up one of the nails and think about his destiny. Yet he did so willingly to fulfill God's word.

"Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished. (Matthew 5:17-18)

Three times the night of Jesus' death he pointed out to them that all that was happening was a part of God's prophecies and that He was fulfilling them before their eyes (Mt. 26:31,54,56).

Three Principles of Divine Government

One died in rebellion

God made human beings with free will. They may choose to obey God or rebel against Him. The first thief had chosen to live in rebellion.

His life as a thief was a manifestation of His disrespect for the authority of God.

I don't know what made him angry; but whatever it was it, it was only intensified at the moment of his crucifixion. He died "hurling abuse"

at the Lord, continuing the rebellion against God he had shown all his life.

One died in repentance

The second thief had committed sins which he now freely acknowledges. He demonstrates a second principle in God's economy—repentance.

In this world, there are no perfect men. To some degree all of them can be called “rebels” against the authority of the Creator. But everyone can have a change of heart and turn back to God.

“Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, (Acts 17:30)

One died for redemption

Jesus illustrates the third principle of divine government. God in His grace and mercy toward lawless men has offered a way of redemption. Rebellion against God enslaves us to sin and its consequences; but redemption can take place through the sacrifice of Jesus' blood.

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, (Ephesians 1:7)

Three Outcomes

One died to enter heaven

To the second thief Jesus extended His grace:

And He said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43)

Jesus promise gave the penitent thief hope that in the Hadean realm he would experience beauty and life. Paradise was the term Jews used in Jesus' day for the realm of the saved in the afterlife.

One died to miss heaven

We must surely pity the first thief. Think of it. He took what didn't belong to Him and sinned against God. But he refused to take the only thing that was worth taking—heaven.

One died to open heaven

For 15 centuries God had been silently declaring the restricted access to His presence by the tabernacle and the temple. He put a large partition between the two portions of the tabernacle, so that all would understand that sinners could not come into His presence.

But on this day, and through Jesus' cross, access to God was opened up. The Hebrew writer puts it this way:

Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Hebrews 10:19-22)

Conclusion: We need to look often at the three crosses of Calvary and reflect upon what they mean. There is significance to all three.

The one in the middle is the most important! The cross of Jesus is the central event of human history. What Jesus did there was the event of the ages. Nothing that happened before or since is as significant to humanity. But the other two are also significant. They represent two kinds of men. All of us can see ourselves on one of the two remaining two crosses, either the thief that rebelled or the thief that repented.