

The Cross is the Center

It was a Friday morning about 9:00 that it began. It would be over by 3:00 that afternoon. What can you do in six hours? In our modern, high-tech world, you can send e-mail all over the world and you can get an automobile and travel 300 miles or more. You can hop on an airplane and go from one end of the country to the other. There's a lot you can do in six hours. But that day was over 2,000 years ago.

What did the people do in those six hours? Probably like any other day, a farmer got up and began to plow his field because it was spring and it was about time to plant. A housewife I'm sure got up and began to be busy with her daily house chores. A merchant opened up his shop, and he did a brisk day's business for six hours, getting ready for the Sabbath and for the Passover weekend. You can do a lot in six hours. But all that was done in Jerusalem during that six hour, and for that matter all that was done all over the world in all the days combined, paled in comparison to what was being done on a hill called, "Calvary." A man was being crucified, a very special man nailed to a Roman cross. His was on one of three crosses erected that day, the middle one.

A visitor who happened to come to Jerusalem that day might have seen the crosses, shook his head and thought, "Oh, one of those sad but necessary executions in order to keep the peace and to keep justice." The Roman soldiers assigned to the task knew little of this mysterious young carpenter who refused to beg or whine or complain. They had no idea that this one that practically laid himself down on that cross could be anything other than just a Nazarene.

Oh, but some strange things began to happen. First, there was the darkness, a blackness darker than an eclipse. The sky had an eerie, hellish gloom. It's as if God, the Father, had turned his back on the earth, maybe even to shed a tear. Then there was the earthquake that Matthew tells us about. A mysterious rumble from the very womb of the earth caused the rocks to split. Prisoners of the grave were released from death's cold grip. Reports spread all the way around Jerusalem of the bodies that had been entombed actually walking down the streets; no doubt loved ones saw and talked with them.

The curtain, that massive veil in the temple that separated the holy place from "the Holy of Holies," would be torn apart. The place where only once a year as the High Priest would take in the blood from an unblemished lamb to sprinkle upon the mercy seat to make atonement, a sacrifice for all the people. That curtain was 40 feet high and it weighed several tons. But during those six hours, somebody, something, somehow tore that massive curtain from top to bottom as if two great hands ripped it apart. As if the great God of the universe was saying, the high priest has entered the Holy of Holies for the last time, the final Day of Atonement. He'll never have to go in there again.

Well, this was no ordinary Friday. Jerusalem was captured in the throes of the mystery that she couldn't understand. People were beginning to wonder as they saw some things and as they heard other things. Could it be? Could it be? No! It couldn't be. That Nazarene man might be something other than just a man, something more than just a carpenter who lived in Nazareth, maybe even something more than a prophet. You can almost hear the entire thought process of an entire community. In fact, they buzzed about it for days and days and days.

Do you remember Pentecost? Do you remember how 3,000 people were baptized on one day? Have you ever wondered how 3,000 people were baptized on one day? It wasn't just the power of one sermon. You see what had happened in Jerusalem that day was all that everybody talked about for seven weeks. What did all those mysterious things mean? Then Peter on that Pentecost Day, inspired by the Spirit, unsealed it. He said, "That was the Son of God on that cross." That's why it happened.

Have you ever stopped to consider how central it is to human history? All of time is measured by it. All of this book, the Bible, is its story. All the Old Testament history points to it, a type of things to come. Now type is a person, place, or thing in the Hebrew religion that foreshadows or anticipates a person, place or thing in the New Covenant. In other words, it was a symbol back there that foreshadows or anticipates something here. Frankly, the Old Testament is filled with beautiful types. When you take the time to see and understand them, it helps you to piece together God's magnificent providence and you can see that the story is the same all the way through history, pointing to the very same conclusion.

The most beautiful types in the Old Testament are those that foreshadow the cross. Do you remember the first Passover? As the blackness of the plague of the death of the firstborn crept across Egypt, it surely foreshadowed the blackness at midday on that Friday just as a Lamb was slain in each of those Hebrew homes that night so the death angel would pass over, leaving that family unharmed. It set the stage for the time that the real Lamb, the Lamb of God, would be slain allowing death to pass over humanity again.

Or how about that Ark of the Covenant, the mysterious Ark of the Covenant introduced to us in Exodus 25 on Mount Sinai? Do you remember the name of the covering of the Ark of the Covenant? It was called, "The Mercy Seat." On that "Mercy Seat" once a year, the high priest would come into the Holy of Holies with the blood from an unblemished lamb and sprinkle drops of blood on the Mercy Seat so that sin would be taken away. But it was at the cross where the real mercy seat was established and where the blood of the perfect sacrifice wasn't just sprinkled, but flowed that would take away all sin for all time.

Or how about when the Israelites had been grumbling and complaining and sinning again and God threw them in the midst of venomous snakes and they were being bitten and being killed. Then Moses, after praying fashioned a bronze serpent, put it on a pole and lifted it up. Their cure from certain death was free and available to all. But they had to take some action on their own. They had to look upon it to live. But in doing so they did not earn the cure for it was free to all. By looking upon the bronze serpent they did not work but they did take action in order to live. (Numbers 21) Jesus said in John 3, just like that bronze serpent, "If I be lifted up, I'll draw all men to myself." I could give you two dozen others, but the Old Testament is like a huge sign with an arrow saying, "This way to the cross. This way to the cross."

Then when Jesus came, he lived for it. He lived for the cross.

From his earliest days, the cross cast its shadow ahead of him. From the very day that he came into this world in Bethlehem where there was no room in the inn. It was saying right then, "There's no room for you in this world. You'll not find a place to stay here. You'll be rejected and even crucified."

The gospels record for us no less than a dozen different accounts of Jesus foretelling his own death. I think about Matthew 16 when he and the disciples were having a little R & R (rest and relaxation) at Caesarea, Philippi. Jesus asked, "Who do you think I am?" After they had given speculation, street talk of what others were saying, Peter looked at him and said, "You're the Christ, you're the Son of the Living God." Jesus said, "Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah, for flesh and blood hasn't revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." Jesus knowing now that the men, who would carry on what he was going to die for were beginning to understand. Verse 21 says that, immediately, from that time on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples, how he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the Elders, Chief Priests, and teachers of The Law; that he must be killed and on the third day, raised to life.

He said the same thing in Matthew 17, 20, 21. In Matthew 26 at that *Last Supper*, He told them again, "I'm about to be killed." In those few hours after that in the Garden of Gethsemane, He bowed on His face and asked if there were any other way, He knew that it was for this destiny that He was born. The cross was what Jesus came here for, and He always knew it.

The entire New Testament reflects it. Paul said, "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." (1 Corinthians 1:22, 23) "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." (1 Corinthians 2:2) "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Galatians 6:14) Do you see those three statements? Paul said, "All I know is Christ crucified." Then he said "All I preach is Christ crucified." (1 Corinthians 1:23) "All I boast about is the cross of Christ, Jesus crucified."

(Galatians 6:14) "For me to live is Christ, and to die would be gain" because he was crucified.
(Philippians 1:21)

Folks, you go through the Bible, the New Testament, every sermon preached by Paul or Peter you will see, every one of them focused on the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus. So whether the Old Testament, the New Testament or the whole Bible, the cross is central.

Years ago in the British Royal Navy in their great sailing vessels would weave a blue thread right through the center of the rope that would be used to hoist the main sail because they wanted that rope to be distinguishable. If they needed to hoist it in an emergency, to flee an enemy or to avoid a storm, they looked for the rope with the blue thread right through the middle of it. The cross should be like that. It's always visible and always accessible. It's the main thing, not just in this book, but in life itself. It should be at the very center of everything that we do; the center of our lifestyle, the center of our home life, the center of our work life and our school life. If we ever take Jesus and his cross out of the center, we lose everything.

Have you ever seen signs on posts that stated, "Power Cable Buried Here?" That's what the sayings of the cross are. You come to one of those sayings, you dig down and there is power there—a whole source of power in our lives if we will just take time to understand it. Jesus' final words were "It is finished." (John 19:30) What's finished? The divine plan for redeeming all of humankind is finished. Man's fear of death is finished. The power of guilt is finished. The uncertainty of tomorrow is finished.

The following lessons in this series will focus on seven incredible statements that the Son of God made while in human form. I don't know about you, but to me, nothing was more amazing in the whole spectrum of that divine drama that we call the cross than those seven sayings Jesus made. What would you say if you were on your way to be executed? If it were going to be a slow torturous punishment like Jesus received, what would you dare say while you were hanging on the cross?

Jesus carefully chose the words that he would utter on that cross. They were not random phrases just uttered by some pained martyr. They were intentional statements from God himself to let us have some clues about the unfathomable depth of meaning of that cross on which he hung.

1. **Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.** (Luke 23:34)

Those are the words of forgiveness. To that immediate audience, but extended far beyond them.

2. **Today you shall be with me in paradise.** (Luke 23:42, 43)

Jesus turned to the thief and said words of acceptance to a common criminal, the last person in the world you would think ought to be in paradise that day. A person, who unlike Jesus, was there for crimes he had done.

3. **Dear woman, here is your son,** and to the disciple (John), **Here is your mother.** (John 19:25)

Words of comfort, even amidst his agony, the beautiful words of comfort.

4. **My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?**

(Matthew 27:46)

What do those words mean? Words of separation, a horrible separation but a separation that had to occur if we are going to live forever.

5. **I thirst** (John 19:28)

The words of humanity showing us that Jesus was not some type of freak, he was just like you and me. He hurt, he thirsted, he hungered and he understood our pain.

6. **It is finished.** (John 19:30)

The words of victory. The greatest words ever uttered.

7. **Into thy hands I commit My spirit** (Luke 42:36)

The great words of ultimate surrender.

The cross is at the heart of our faith. It is the central part of what we stand for. It is the only reason that we can gather as a community of faith.

I ran across a modern parable this week that I'm afraid reveals the status of too many individuals, and for that matter, too many churches. The parable talks about a church that erected a brand-new building. They made it awfully nice and behind the pulpit area they erected a sign that said, "We preach Christ crucified." Then down in the lower corner they put a small potted plant, one of these creeping vines that would kind of go up the wall for decoration. As time passed, the vine began to grow and as it grew the congregation began to mellow. After a while it covered that last word "crucified." The

readable part of the sign displayed only, "We preach Christ" sure enough not so much the cross just the nice socially-oriented Jesus who showed compassion on all needs. But the vine kept growing and the congregation kept mellowing and after a while, only the words, "We preach," showed. Eventually they had just forgotten about Christ. The whole idea was a human gospel, a human religion responding to human needs, searching for any answer, but not a cross. Finally the vine continued to grow until all that was left was the word, "We." I pray to God that in our life, we still proclaim Christ crucified.

If you're wondering how much the cross is at the center of your very being, answer these three questions in your heart today.

1. **Does the cross bring you to your knees in thankfulness?** Do you fall prostrate before that and thank God for the very fact that the gates of heaven are open because of it?
2. **Does the cross free you from guilt?** Or are you carrying around a sack load of it; not laying that guilt at the cross to do the work that it was designed to do?
3. **Does the cross cause you to surrender daily to God?** — Are you dying on your own cross and letting Christ live in you?

If you can't answer those three questions today as well as you would like to, I hope and pray that by the time we finish this series, your life has changed. Amazing Grace Lesson #1250 Steve Flatt - February 18, 1996