

Few things seem to shock us anymore. CNN pumps scenes of inhumane treatment right into our living rooms via the television screen. We see mass graves in Rwanda. We hear of merciless acts of terrorism in southern Iraq. Yet few in our country have not been enflamed by the unthinkable injustice that occurred in Oklahoma City last week. There is but one word fit to depict a cold-blooded deed which inflicted pain and death on dozens of unsuspecting people. It is an atrocity.

Webster defines atrocity as "a specific act of extreme heinousness or cruelty." Atrocities bombard us daily. In fact, we live in a peculiar culture that has almost become accustomed to, even used to acts of evil. As people who seek to reflect the heart of God, we must not become desensitized to evil and pain. What can we do to keep from being callused to suffering. There is no easy answer. But I am convinced the key lies in an event that occurred nearly two millennia ago.

There is one atrocity that ever grips the heart of the person who loves God. In its history, the world has committed no greater atrocity than the one that occurred on a hill nicknamed, "The Place of the Skull." I am speaking of the Cross of Jesus Christ.

To us, the cross is a familiar story, and so it should be. The cross is central to all we are and believe. The cross is the key to heaven. The cross is the key to life. We need to journey to the cross this morning, for in seeing the atrocity of the cross, we learn how to respond to atrocity.

Someone might think, "Oh, another message on the cross. I've heard several before." To which I would say, frankly, as a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ, my aim is not to be novel. My objective in preaching is not to make people feel good with sermonettes that are clever and cute. It is to please God by leading people to make a proper response to what God has done and said. Quite honestly, those who have a truly vibrant relationship with Christ never tire of traveling to the cross.

A. Catherine Hankey testified with these words, "I love to tell the story--tis pleasant to repeat what seems, each time I tell it, more wonderfully sweet...I love to tell the story, for those who know it best seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest; And when in scenes of glory I sing the new, new song, 'Twill be the old, old story that I have loved so long."

Proposition: This morning, we're going to look at the cross from three perspectives. Our text will be Mark 15:16-41.

I. Perspective #1: What did the Cross mean to Jesus?

- A. He was treated as a criminal (16-20).
 1. He was abused verbally.
 2. He was abused physically.
- B. He refused a sedative (23).
- C. He died with sinners (27).

***Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

- D. He chose not to save Himself (30-31).
 - E. He experienced the consequences of sin (33-34).
 - F. He did not die as a martyr, but as a sacrifice (37).
- II. Perspective #2: What did the Cross mean to the People at the scene?
- A. The soldiers were callused to it (16).
 - B. Simon was forced to give attention to it (21).
 - C. The priests and teachers mocked it (31).
 - D. The robbers insulted Him for it (32).
 - E. The centurion was impacted by it (39).
 - F. Certain women pondered it (40).
 - G. Joseph was transformed by it (43).
- III. Perspective #3: What should the Cross mean to Us?
- A. The cross should convict us.
 - B. The cross should humble us.
 - C. The cross should give us hope.
 - D. The cross should motivate us.

We are in week #5 in our series, "The Passion Week of Jesus." Our aim has been to grasp what actually happened to Jesus during the final seven days of His earthly ministry. I remind you we are not seeking merely to learn, but to learn so as to drive us to our knees in worship.

Before we come to the cross, allow me to make an important observation that Mark points out clearly in his gospel account. Throughout the Passion Week, Jesus intentionally antagonized and confronted the Jewish, religious leaders. He did so in the Triumphal Entry (11:28). He certainly ruffled their feathers when He cleansed the temple (11:18). His parable of the tenants in chapter 12 was an unmistakable rebuke of the so-called spiritual elite (12:12). He undoubtedly was not seeking to gain their applause when He warned the people in 12:38, "Beware of the scribes...!" What Jesus said and did was so offensive that the Jewish leaders came to a diabolical decision (14:1-2)--This Jesus of Nazareth must die.

Why didn't Jesus tone down His stinging rebukes of the Chief Priests, Scribes, and Pharisees? Didn't He realize such words and actions could get Him killed? He did. Never forget this. For Jesus, the cross was no accident. It was the very reason for which He came to the world. Mark 10:45 is somewhat of a theme verse in Mark's gospel, "For the Son of man came, not to be ministered unto but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many."

I. Perspective #1: What did the Cross mean to Jesus?

My sermon approach this morning is not to do a word by word, exegetical study of what happened at the cross. We've done that before. What I want to do is help us to take a fresh look at the familiar. My objective is simple--to see the cross from three perspectives. I am asking the Spirit of God to use this message so that noone will be able to leave this morning saying, "So what?" True, we'll spend time looking back at what happened on the cross (past tense), but we'll also devote attention to the implications (present tense).

We start first by looking back. What did the cross mean to Jesus? Most of us are very familiar with the account of the cross. Yet in our familiarity, there are 6 facts we must not forget.

A. He was treated as a criminal (16-20).

I must remind you of the injustices we saw last week in Mark 15:1-15. Jesus was subjected to an unjust trial, both by the Jews and Romans. In point of fact, as the result of Jesus' so-called "trial," the Romans released a guilty man (Barabbas) and condemned the only truly innocent man who ever lived (15). Pilate washed his hands of the ordeal, and handed Jesus over to the soldiers.

One thing is clear from the narrative. Jesus was treated as a hardened, despised criminal. As I read the account, notice Jesus endured two types of abuse at the hands of the soldiers.

1. He was abused verbally.

We read in v 16, "And the soldiers led Him away into the hall, called Praetorium; and they called together the whole band." The NIV calls it a "whole company." Ordinarily a company consisted of 600 Roman soldiers. In this case, it may have been an auxiliary battalion of 200-300 soldiers, probably that was stationed in Caesarea but came to Jerusalem with Pilate. V 17 continues, "And they clothed Him with purple, and plaited a crown of thorns (perhaps palm spikes), and put it about His head." "With this 'crown' the soldiers unwittingly pictured God's curse on sinful humanity being thrust on Jesus (B.K.C.)." Then came the verbal abuse in v 18, "And began to salute Him, Hail, King of the Jews!"

The soldiers knew the accusation Jesus' prosecutors railed against Him. They said He claimed to be a king. These men knew only one king, Caesar. So they mocked Jesus with cynical words.

2. He was abused physically.

V 19 "And they smote Him on the head with a reed, and did spit upon Him." The tense of the verbs in v 19 is what is called the "imperfect," which indicates a past activity that was continuous. The NIV captures the sense, "Again and again they struck Him on the head with a staff and spit on Him." The physical abuse was excruciating. I remind you that the soldiers had already battered Jesus' body with a vicious flogging (15). The treatment in v 19 was pure mockery.

When the sadistic whims of the soldiers were satisfied, they ripped the purple robe off of Jesus back (20), no doubt aggravating the raw wounds there, and returned His own clothes to Him. Mark's narrative is gripping in its simplicity. V 20 states, "And led Him out to crucify Him." V 24 continues, "And when they had crucified Him." Mark wrote his gospel in the late 60's, to a Roman audience that needed no explanation of the horrid details of crucifixion.

B. He refused a sedative (23).

The soldiers had made a cruel science out of crucifixion. Typically, when a person was crucified, he hung on his cross for two to three days. The executioners often drugged the criminal to dull the pain (and lengthen the time of suffering). So they tried with Jesus in v 23, "And they gave Him to drink wine mingled with myrrh; but He received it not."

Why did Jesus refuse the sedative? Simply, because He chose to experience the full weight of the pain and suffering of the cross.

C. He died with sinners (27).

You know this detail, but allow me to reiterate it. V 27 says, "And with Him they crucify two thieves, the one on His right hand, and the other on His left." Eight centuries earlier, Isaiah predicted this of the Suffering Servant (Isa 53:9), "And He made His grave with the wicked, and with the rich in His death." Jesus was numbered with transgressors in His death. Throughout His life, He companied with sinners, and in the end, He choose to die with sinners. A fourth fact...

D. He chose not to save Himself (30-31).

A dramatic episode is recorded in v 30. Passersby railed at Him, "Save thyself, and come down from the cross." I remind you as General Booth said long ago (Barclay, 362), "It is because Jesus did NOT come down from the Cross that we believe in Him." He chose NOT to save Him. He could have, mind you. He could have called 10,000 angels. But He chose not to save Himself. Why not? To save us.

E. He experienced the consequences of sin (33-34).

Think about something. Up until this point in Jesus' life, He had experienced every human encounter but one. He had felt hunger and thirst and temptation. He knew the pain of being abandoned by friends and hated by enemies. But until the cross, He had never known the consequence of sin (Barclay, 364). He had never felt the dreaded horror of being alienated from God. But on the cross, He did.

Notice vv 33-34, "And when the sixth hour was come, there was darkness...And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying...My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken Me?" Do you see it? There on the cross, Jesus knew what it was to be a sinner. He experienced the consequences of sin, that is, spiritual death (Rom 6:23). Sin separated Him from His Father--not His sin, but ours.

F. He did not die as a martyr, but as a sacrifice (37).

One brief detail in the text underscores this (37). Typical victims of crucifixion died of sheer exhaustion and suffocation. Not Jesus. V 37 reads, "And Jesus cried with a loud voice, and gave up the spirit." Jesus died when He willed to die, when His payment as a sacrifice was complete.

What did the cross mean for Jesus? May we not forget these 6 facts. On the cross, He was treated as a criminal. He refused a sedative. He died with sinners. He chose not to save Himself. He experienced the consequences of sin. He did not die as a martyr, but as a sacrifice. What kind of impact did Jesus' death make on the bystanders?

II. Perspective #2: What did the Cross mean to the People at the scene?

It's intriguing to look at the Cross from the perspective of those who were there that day. Let's retrace our steps, and look at the cross again. Mark unveils seven attitudes exhibited towards the cross by those who saw it firsthand.

A. The soldiers were callused to it (16).

Did you ever wonder why the Roman soldiers mocked Jesus? The Jewish leaders were motivated by envy, but the soldiers didn't even know Him. Why were they so vicious in their treatment? I would suggest that their contempt was not so much for Jesus personally, as it was for the Jewish nation (B.K.C.). To the Romans, the Jews were a

thorn in the side. The Roman soldiers knew the Jews hated the Romans, and in fact longed for their own king. When they jammed the crown of thorns on the head of this Nazareth, it was a joke to them, "Jews, you want a king? Here's your king!"

B. Simon was forced to give attention to it (21).

Harry Truman once wrote a letter to his mother that said, "I went to the White House to see the President and discovered I was the President." Warren Wiersbe observes this of Simon of Cyrene, "Simon had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover and he ended up meeting the Passover Lamb (164)!"

When Jesus followed the Viadolarosa, He stumbled under the weight of the cross. The Roman soldiers "volunteered" a Jew in the crowd to carry the crossbeam. V 21 uses the word "compel" for Simon had no choice. He was forced to give attention to the cross.

By the way, I'd like to ask our young people something. Are you like Simon? Are you giving attention to the cross this morning because you want to, or because someone made you?

C. The priests and teachers mocked it (31).

Those words stung (31), "He saved others; Himself He cannot save." Was that true? No. He could have, but didn't. Thank God, our Savior ignored the ridicule of the priests and teachers who mocked Him.

D. The robbers insulted Him for it (32).

V 32 reads, "And they that were crucified with Him reviled Him." Luke tells us, though Mark doesn't, that later one of the robbers repented. Mark tells only of the insults.

E. The centurion was impacted by it (39).

The centurion was the commander of the Roman company. He was a hardened soldier who no doubt joined in the jeers. But as he watched the way Jesus died, he was stunned. He had never seen anyone die like this. Mark records his testimony (39), "Truly this man was the Son of God." Whether or not the centurion understood the full weight of those words, and whether or not he was converted that day, we can't be sure. But this we know. The centurion was impacted by the cross!

F. Certain women pondered it (40).

Others fled. These women remained to see the cross (and would see the tomb).

G. Joseph was transformed by it (43).

Jesus' death gave Joseph a shot of boldness, for he went straight to Pilate. Now we're ready for crunch time. It's one thing to considered what the cross meant to others...

III. Perspective #3: What should the Cross mean to Us?

I will be specific. The cross should affect us in four practical ways.

A. The cross should convict us.

Why? For this reason. The cross reveals how much God hates our sin. May I be frank? You may think the sin in your life is not that big of a deal, but I remind you that Jesus faced the atrocity of the cross because of it.

God hates sin. God hates our sin. How can we fondle and tolerate it in our lives? The cross should convict us when we think that it was because of our sin that the Savior died. Do you have any known, unconfessed sin in your life, any sinful thought, attitude, or habit? I invite you to come to the cross, and leave it there.

B. The cross should humble us.

It is beyond the ability of our finite minds to comprehend the fact that, on the cross, God died for us. Wesley pondered this baffling truth when he asked the question, "Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou my God shouldst die for me?"

Rubel Shelly tells this story (from Leadership): Jason Tuskes was a 17-year-old high school honor student. He was close to his mother, his wheelchair-bound father, and his younger brother. Jason was an expert swimmer who loved to scuba dive. He left home on a Tuesday morning to explore a spring and underwater cave near his home in west-central Florida. His plan was to be home in time to celebrate his mother's birthday. Jason became lost in the cave. Then, in his panic, he got wedged into a narrow passageway. When he realized he was trapped, he shed his yellow metal air tank and unsheathed his diver's knife. With the tank as a tablet and the knife as a pen, he wrote one last message to his family: "I love you Mom, Dad, and Christian." Then he ran out of air and drowned.

The love Jason Tuskes expressed to his family in his dying message is moving. How much more is the message Jesus sent to us from the cross. The cross should humble us. We are unworthy of such love! Are you living for Jesus Christ? Why would anyone NOT want to surrender total allegiance to One Who loved us enough to die in our place?

C. The cross should give us hope.

Are you in need of hope? Then come to the cross. The cross is a place of hope for people without hope. The cross is a place of answers for people full of questions. The cross is a place of forgiveness for people who are loaded with guilt. The cross is a place of rest for the weary. The cross is a place of acceptance for sinful outcasts.

My friend, are you uncertain about your relationship with God? Are you perplexed about your standing with God? Then come to the cross. Christ reconciled us to God at the cross. How do we know? Because the cross wasn't the end. The tomb is empty. We can KNOW that all is well between us and God because of the cross.

D. The cross should motivate us.

When I think of what He did for me, how can I do less than give Him my life? Since He died for me, should I not be willing to live for Him? Are you living for Jesus? Is your life pleasing to Him?

Mark wrote this gospel for Christians who were facing the very real threat of death for the cause of Christ. How do you motivate people who may soon lose their lives? Mark took them to the cross.

Are you growing as a Christian? If not, why not? Is not the cross of Jesus enough motivation to surrender everything to Him? Yes!

What difference should the cross make in our lives? Ira Stanphill tells us, "The cross upon which Jesus died is a shelter in which we can hide; And its grace so free is sufficient for me, and deep is its fountain--as wide as the sea. Tho millions have found Him a friend, and have turned from the sins they have sinned; The Savior still waits to open the gates, and welcomes a sinner before it's too late. The hand of my Savior is strong, and the love of my Savior is long; Through sunshine or rain, through loss or in gain, the blood flows from Calvary to cleanse every stain. There's room at the cross for you, there's room at the cross for you; Tho millions have come, there's still room for one-- Yes, there's room at the cross for you."