

THE HOUR OF CRUCIFIXION

Mark 15:25 - *"And it was the third hour, and they crucified him."*

It is rather interesting to note that the cross is not mentioned in the Old Testament, but this does not mean that the cross was unknown before Christ. Crosses were in common use long before the birth of our Savior. They were usually made of small trees, light enough so that one man could drag them. But they were not quite so massive as some artists depict them. The length of the cross was perhaps from fifteen to eighteen feet. We can arrive at that figure in this way: Three feet were needed above the cross piece for the sign which stated the crime; Six feet would be needed for the average body of a man, another four to six feet were used for the elevation of the crucified body above the ground; and finally, we must add perhaps three more feet for placing the cross into a hole in the ground so it could be set upright. The sign above the cross usually stated the malefactor's crime for the benefit of the passersby, or the people watching the execution. Some signs might read like this - "Killed Two People," or "Highway Robber" or "Rebel and Outlaw." In the case of Jesus, the sign above His head read, "Jesus of Nazareth the King of Jews." The Jews wrangled a little with Pilate about the wording above the cross of Jesus, but Pilate finally insisted that it stand as it was written.

There were three types of crosses used in those days, one like the letter "X", another like the letter "T" and the dagger type which we all know so well. Although the Bible does not state which type of cross was used for Christian' crucifixion, it is, however, universally believed that He was crucified on the dagger type cross because of the sign above His head.

Long before He Himself was crucified, Jesus said in Matthew 16:24, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." Everyone knew what the Lord meant, because they had seen criminals dragging heavy crosses out to the execution grounds on Mount Calvary. "Taking up the cross" or "carrying a heavy cross" became synonymous with having very great troubles and ills in the world. We still use the terms in the same way today. Now remember, all this was known and understood about the cross long before the birth of Christ.

Far back in history someone invented the cross. He must've been proud of his diabolical invention! With perverted satisfaction he must've viewed this new discovery to prolong the agony of his fellow man! In those days, instead of mercifully and quickly taking the life of a criminal, government officials pondered carefully how to wing out the last ounce of torture from the miserable creatures who were condemned to die. Yes, someone' who worked and perverted brain invented the cross, an instrument of prolonged torture and agony. Jesus predicted this form of death for Himself, as we read in Matthew 20:19, where he foretold that his enemies would "deliver him to the Gentiles... to crucify him." That hour was now fast approaching -- the hour of crucifixion.

Our text is amazingly short and simple. "And it was the third hour, and they crucified him." All the gruesome details are suppressed, for everyone can imagine what took place. St. Mark expresses no righteous indignation at the outrage; he has no word of compassion for the innocent sufferer; no praise of God's patience in permitting His Son to submit to this terrible death; he expresses no surprise at the meekness of Jesus. All these details are suppressed and hushed. "And they crucified him." A simple statement, with a world of feeling and meaning in it.

Since the Bible gives so few details about the crucifixion and its accompanying torture, and no attempt will be made to dwell on the horrible details. With solemn dignity let us draw near to the cross of Jesus. "It was the third hour," says Mark, which is about nine o'clock on the morning of Good Friday. Let us consider:

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1. Time of Blackest Disgrace

The cross was a form of capital punishment for the most serious of crimes and was very widespread. Alexander the Great crucified a thousand people. The Romans also introduced crucifixion into their territories, but used it only for slaves, or for people who had committed some unusually terrible crime. At the time of Christ the Romans regarded crucifixion as one of the worst disgraces that could happen to a person, and for that reason Roman citizens were usually exempt from this death. The disgrace of the cross was reserved for slaves and the lowest criminals.

Originally a person was scorned before being crucified. Here again the inventive genius of the warped mind comes to the fore. The Romans tied bits of metal or sharp bone to the ends of the lashes so that the pain of scourging and whipping would be increased.

If, after scourging, the criminal could still do so, he was made to carry his cross to Calvary, also called Golgotha. The crowds that surrounded the intended victim would jeer and mock and laugh at him. After that, he was nailed to the cross. Crucifixion entailed a very slow, extremely painful death. If, for some reason or another, the death of the condemned man was to be speeded up, the executioners would break his bones.

Almost everything done to Jesus during His suffering and death was done with one purpose -- to disgrace Him as much as possible. Why was Judas, one of Jesus' own trusted disciples, so satisfactory to the rulers of the Jews? Because it would be a greater disgrace to Jesus to be betrayed by one of His own followers than by someone else. When Jesus was before the chief priest, His enemies tried to disgrace him. The soldiers, by mocking and spitting on Him and slapping Him, were disgracing Him. The crown of thorns He wore was a disgrace and shame. "Look at the King!" The enemies jeered. When the Jews insisted upon freeing Barabbas instead of Jesus, they were again shaming and disgracing the Lord. Barabbas was one of the lowest possible criminals, yet he was freed by the Jews instead of Jesus. They were thereby saying that they considered Jesus much lower down the scale of humanity than that terrible man and Barabbas. What disgrace they heaped on Jesus! Before Pilate the Jews cried out again and again, "Crucify him, crucify him!" Not "Kill Him," but "Crucify Him" to heap greater shame and disgrace upon Jesus. What they were actually saying was, "Give Him that death which is reserved for the lowest of criminals. Even crucifixion is too good for Him, but if that is the most disgraceful way to die, and that is the death we want for him." Across was a mark of the most intense hatred.

The crucifixion of Christ took place on a public road, where all eyes could see Him, so that disgrace upon disgrace could be laid upon him. The place where they crucified Him was Calvary, which means "place of the skull," a symbol of all the wicked people killed there. And man was really "numbered with the wicked" when he died on Calvary. They stripped Jesus of most of his clothes, and His naked body was disgraced before all eyes. And this shameful deed was done in their capital city, the scene of many wonderful miracles done by Jesus!

To add to His disgrace, they put Jesus between two thieves, to show they regarded Him as the chief of evildoers. Even the sign above His head was a disgrace: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews!" Everyone knew that it was not true; He had never claimed to be the King of the Jews in an earthly, political sense. Though wagging of heads, the reviling, they jeering were all intended to increase the shame of the cross. They made sport of Him, a twisted and turned His words and blasphemed Him.

Surrounded by this shroud of disgrace and hatred, Jesus made one of the most remarkable statements ever heard by a man, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." When you first hear these words, you begin to doubt your ears, wondering whether you heard correctly.

How could they continue to disgrace such a person who displayed such a love for His tormentors? How could they continue to hate and abuse Jesus who showed them how far divine love could go? You would expect the executioners to be shocked into awed inaction by these first words from the cross. Instead of the

usual cursing by the ordinary criminal, they heard the words, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Many years later the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians, "Christ humbled himself and became obedient unto death," and then he adds in amazement, "even the death of the cross." Paul was amazed, because crucifixion was the death of blackest disgrace. The cross was a mark of horror and loathing in shame, somewhat as a death by hanging is today. You have a relative or forefather crucified was the same as having one of your forefathers hanging by a rope. That would be a shameful disgrace.

The hour of crucifixion was a time of blackest disgrace for Jesus. But there is another way of looking upon the cross of Christ. As we consider the hour of crucifixion we shall see that it was also:

II. A Time of Brightest Glory

Paul wrote to the Galatians, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14). So, in spite of the disgrace of the cross, there is something glorious about the cross of Jesus. A tree brought a curse upon world, and by a tree that curse was removed. Is that not something glorious and wonderful?

The cross brings out the terribleness of sin. Our sins must be truly great if Christ had to be so disgraced to pay for them. The very horribleness of the cross makes God's love to us shine with a new and wonderful light. Did God really love me that much? Could he disgrace His own Son in my stead? Can such love be possible? The words in John 3:16, "God so loved the world," take on a new meaning. Christ was numbered with the transgressors so that we might be numbered with the Saints. The early Christians soon altered their feelings about the cross. Although it was something associated with the lowest and vilest of criminals, yet Jesus used this form of death to save the world. Since Christ died on a cross for them, the cross gradually became a mark of honor and glory. The early Christians did not alter their feelings about all crosses, but about one cross, the one on which Christ had died for them.

Let's use an example. Suppose Christ had chosen to die by hanging. Ordinarily, hanging is disgraceful, but if the Lord had paid for our sins by being hanging, I believe that all churches would be proud of, and would display, a rope or noose. The rope or noose is certainly an object of shame and disgrace, but had our Lord chosen that form of death to save us, and it would have become a mark of brightest glory for us. To use another example. To be born in a stable among cattle would certainly not be a mark of honor or respect. A stable is a place for cattle to be born, not human beings. But since Jesus was born in a stable, we regard His stable as a place of honor and glory; we make much of it during the Christmas season.

Today we no longer associate the cross with shame and disgrace. In fact we are so proud of the cross that we put it on the steeples of our churches and on all our altars; we often wear crosses on our clothes, and we like to make the sign of the cross in prayer. Of course, we do not wish to be misunderstood, as though the cross for some magical sign they can ward off evil. The cross itself must not be regarded in a superstitious manner. But we do glory in the cross of Jesus, for there by he regained us from all sins and evil. For us there is a golden light surrounding the cross, the light of eternal life and glory. In that sense Paul meant "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." That cross of Jesus was the means whereby all our sins were taken away, so that through faith in Christ we can go to heaven. Truly the cross ought to take on a new and brighter meaning for us all.

Generations may come and go, good days and dead days may follow one another, health may turn into sickness and death; but the cross always towers over the wrecks of time. The ancient emperors rose and fell, they budded forth and faded away, but the cross is planted more firmly than ever in this sin-cursed world. Faith

in this cross changes the heart and soul of a person and makes of him a new creature -- one that loves God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost more and more day by day. Faith in that cross also shows itself in love to our fellow man as Jesus bids us, "Love one another, as I have loved you" (John 15:12).

Keep your eyes on that cross; it will give you joy and peace in this world and everlasting glory in the next world. "And it was the third hour, and they crucified him." Oh, what shame and disgrace thou didst endure for me -- but oh! What glory I find in Thy holy cross, oh Jesus! Therefore I saying:

In the cross of Christ I glory,

Towering over the wrecks of time.

All the light of sacred story

Gathers round its head sublime. Amen.

The Prayer

Oh, what disgrace in shame and indignities were heaped upon Thee, O Savior, in Thy crucifixion! Thou didst humble Thyself unto the lowest of deaths and from Thy holy lips came no word of complaint or bitterness. Thou didst thereby transform the cross, an object of abhorrence, into a sign of our honor and glory. All Thy sufferings were only for us. Therefore except our humble thanks, oh dearest Jesus.

May we show our love to Thee by loving one another, as Thou dost desire us to. Let Thy cross transform our cold hearts, that we grow in love day by day.

Oh holy Lord, may we always be found near thy cross, for only there can forgiveness of sins be found. By Thy Holy Spirit keep us trusting in the all the days of our lives, so that when our final hour comes, we may be able to say:

"Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes,

Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies.

Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadow's flee;

In life, and death, oh Lord, abide with me!"

Here is for the sake of Thy cross. Amen.