

THE CRUCIFIXION AND BURIAL OF CHRIST

Mark 15:16-47

Every scene from the life of Christ is vitally interesting to true Christians. Between Bethlehem's manger and Calvary's cross He encountered much opposition. He was betrayed, arrested, forsaken, tried and condemned. Even though he could not find any fault in Christ, Pilate yielded to the blood-thirsty mob that was clamoring for His crucifixion.

At best, the Roman soldiers were a rough lot, but in their treatment of Christ they were never more cruel nor less sensitive to the laws of common decency. The heartless derision was begun by the soldiers to whom Pilate had given the shameful task of executing the sentence of death. Knowing that Christ Jesus had been condemned for claiming to be a king, in mock homage the Roman soldiers took Him into the palace, stripped Him, put a robe on Him, placed a crown of thorns on His brow and pressed it down, placed a reed in His hand and derisively saluted Him. They spat on Him and smote Him on the head with a reed. Then, they removed the robe from Him and reclothed Him with His own attire. From the pile, which lay close by, they selected a cross and laid it on His shoulders. The procession then passed along the most frequented streets of the city.

More beastly brutality cannot be imagined than that to which Christ was subjected. It is a solemn illustration of the depth to which human nature can sink, and of the wickedness of which it is capable. They repeatedly spat on Christ, which was the strongest expression of contempt that they knew. They kept on smiting Christ on the head, probably taking the reed from His hand as they came to Him and then giving it back to Him for the next soldier to take.

Then there was the crown of thorns. What a sight Christ must have been by the time all this was done! And why? Because the presence of holiness and love and godliness drew into evidence and stung into action sin and hate and devilry. Remember it was the Son of God Who was thus buffeted and battered and broken. Yet "He opened not His mouth." When He was reviled, He reviled not again, and when He suffered, He threatened not, but committed Himself unto Him Who judgeth righteously.

From the scene of Christ's trial to the place of crucifixion was nearly a mile. Each condemned man had to carry the cross on which he was to be executed. We see Christ as He was leaving Pilate's judgment hall and starting to Calvary, bearing His own cross. He did not bear it very far until His strength failed. The sleepless nights, the severe scourgings, the painful crown of thorns, the agony of Gethsemane and the weight of the cross were too much for Him. He either fell beneath the load of the cross or showed signs of doing so. This moved the soldiers to further brutal treatment. There was nothing to do except to transfer the heavy cross to the shoulders of another. It seems that a man from North Africa was just then entering the city, and seeing this brutal treatment, protested, whereupon the soldiers promptly laid hold of him and made him carry the cross from the city gate to Golgotha, which was a skull-shaped hill a short distance outside the city wall.

Upon their arrival at Calvary, they stripped Christ, His garments falling to the executioners, and laid Him on His back on the cross, which was lying on the ground. They drove the cruel spikes through the palms of His hands, fastening them to the two ends of the cross-piece. They nailed His feet to the upright piece. While the blood was flowing, a hole was prepared in the

ground, the cross was lifted on end and dropped like a thud, leaving Him to suffer a lingering and painful death as the blood dripped from His head, His hands and His feet.

This job of crucifying Jesus Christ was all in a day's work for the Roman soldiers. When they had performed their official duty, and the condemned men were hanging on their crosses in full view of the multitude, the soldiers sat down with a sigh of relief and fastened their eyes on the central figure, Jesus Christ, Who had been the subject of so many remarks during the previous three years. Why did they watch Him? They did so to prevent His friends from taking His body down from the cross, and thus preserve His life. They were there to see that the death sentence was carried out.

When they crucified Christ, the nails were driven through the parts of His hands and His feet which were full of nerves and tendons, and that created the most exquisite anguish. The unnatural position and the violent tension of His body caused a painful sensation from the least motion. In the distended parts of the body more blood flowed through the arteries than could be carried back into the veins. Therefore, too much blood found its way from the aorta into the head and stomach, and the blood vessels of the head became pressed and swollen. The general obstruction of circulation caused an internal excitement, exertion and anxiety more intolerable than death itself. To all of the inexpressible misery and lingering anguish was added a burning and raging thirst.

The Jewish leaders flung one last challenge at Christ Jesus. They said, "Come down from the cross, and we will believe in you." That was precisely the wrong challenge. As General Booth said, "It is because Jesus did not come down from the cross that we believe in Him." The death of Christ was absolutely necessary. If Christ had come down from the cross, it would have meant that there was a limit to the love of God, that there was something that the love of God was not prepared to suffer for men, that there was a line beyond which the love of God would not go. But, because Christ went all of the way and died on the cross, there is nothing in all of the universe which the love of God is not prepared to suffer for men. Because Christ refused to come down from the cross we believe in and rest our souls upon the limitless love of God.

It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified our Lord. From noon until three o'clock darkness covered the whole land. At the ninth hour Christ cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" As He bore upon Himself the sins of the world, Christ felt Himself to be utterly alone. Prior to this time Christ had never known what it was to be separated from God by the barrier of sin, but upon this occasion He had taken upon Himself the sin of man. That is one reason why He can understand so well. That is why we need never fear to go to Him when sin cuts us off from God. Because He has gone through it He can help others who are going through it.

Three interesting events accompanied the death of Christ, namely, the rending of the veil of the temple, the acknowledgment of the Roman centurion and the presence of certain women. When Christ by His death, gave all men free access to God, that fact was signified by the rending from top to bottom of the veil or curtain in the temple. The centurion acknowledged that Christ was the Son of God. What a pathetic group were those women, on the outskirts of the crowd, watching through their tears the dying of their dearest friend! These women had much more reason for absenting

themselves than the men had, yet, when the apostles fled, the women followed. Blessed women! Who can tell the anguish of their souls! They had been with Christ much and had done much for Him. They had listened to His wonderful words, observed His wonderful life and seen His wonderful deeds, and knew in their own souls His most wonderful power, but now, bruised, broken and bleeding, He was dying a felon's death. Oh, the anguish of it all! Their faith failed, but their love did not. It is not any wonder that in His resurrection life Christ appeared first of all to one of them. Throughout the history of Christianity women have played a significant part in the service of Christ. Without their faithfulness, their generosity and their willingness to serve, the progress of the gospel throughout the world would have been impeded greatly.

Christ died at three o'clock in the afternoon, thus ending for Him not only pain and agony, but also insult and outrage. Joseph of Arimathaea acted quickly. It frequently happened that the bodies of criminals were never buried at all, but were simply taken down and left for the vultures and the scavenging dogs to consume.

Joseph was a man of wealth and position, a member of the Sanhedrin and a devout Jew who had been looking for the Messiah to come. In the hour of supreme crisis, he did not consent to the course of his fellow councillors who conspired to kill Christ. However, he did not speak a word in favor of Christ or intervene on His behalf. He was a secret disciple of Christ. John said the reason that Joseph had not made a confession of his faith in Christ was that he was afraid of the Jews. Through those momentous months his love had been subjected to his fear, but now, in this hour of crisis, love rose triumphant over fear. When Christ's avowed followers failed Him, the unavowed confessed Him. None of the great things in this crisis were done by the apostles, but by persons of whom practically nothing was known, and of whom we do not hear again. Joseph is the man who gave Jesus Christ a tomb when He was dead, but who was silent when He was alive. Surely he must have regretted that he did not show his love for his Master while He was yet alive. It is one of the most common tragedies of life that we keep our flowers for the graves of people and our praises until they are dead. It would be infinitely better to give them some of these flowers and some of these words of gratitude when they are still alive.

When Christ died on the cross, Joseph threw all caution to the winds and boldly went to Pilate to get permission to lay the body of the Lord in a tomb that he had prepared for himself. Pilate granted Joseph's request. Joseph bought fine linen which was used to prepare a body for burial. The fact that he did not also procure the necessary spices would indicate that he had already talked with Nicodemus, who was also a member of the Sanhedrin, about the burial of Christ. It was evidently agreed that Joseph would provide the tomb and the linen bandages and that Nicodemus would provide the spices. Together they laid their Lord in a sepulchre which was hewn out of a rock and rolled a stone in front of the door. The tender ministry of Joseph and Nicodemus to Christ in the hour of His death has given their names a place of honor in the New Testament. Joseph was a councillor of honorable estate, but his unconfessed discipleship was not honorable. If Christ is worth having, He is worth confessing. Joseph had not been willing to pay the price of confession, which no doubt was high, but the hour came when neutrality was no longer possible. You must either confess or deny. Joseph took a brave stand at the burial of Christ. But it would have been much better and far more comforting to the Lord if he had made an unmistakable assertion of his acceptance of Christ during His public ministry.