
FROM THE MINISTRY OF



THRUthe**BIBLE**

WHEN THE
CROSS DIVIDES

A large, full-canopied tree stands in the center of a field of tall, golden-brown grass. The scene is set at sunset, with a warm orange and yellow glow on the horizon and a clear blue sky above. A dirt path winds through the grass in the foreground.

DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

WHEN THE CROSS DIVIDES

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

-1 Corinthians 1:18

For just a moment, think about the cross of Jesus Christ.

Did you know that what you're thinking of right now tells a lot about you? In this short study of what happened on that cross, Dr. McGee explains how our opinion about the cross tells us about the condition of our hearts. We'll look at the lives of real people in history who chose to believe the cross was the instrument of their salvation and those who thought talk like that was just foolishness. Come to this study with an open heart to all God has for you ... because of the cross.

The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing ...

Three words tell us a lot in this verse. The first word is “message”—“for the message of the cross.” The Greek word Paul used here is *logos*, and it simply means “word.” In one of our newer translations of the New Testament, *logos* is translated quite literally: “For the

word of the cross is to them that perish foolishness.” However, it doesn’t tell us much when we only translate it literally. Paul actually had something else in mind.

Paul had a great deal to say in this epistle of 1 Corinthians about the gospel. He said to the Corinthian believers, “For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). Then, at the fifteenth chapter, he said, “I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:1, 2). Then he gave the gospel facts: Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. According to Paul, that is the gospel. It is *all* the gospel, nothing else but the gospel, and anything else is *not* the gospel. Therefore, I would like to use the word I think Paul had in mind: “The *gospel* of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.”

Now “foolishness” is another interesting word. Although “foolishness” is a good translation, Paul was saying more than that. It’s the Greek word *moria*, from which we get our English word “moron” or “moronic.” Actually, it means something that is good for nothing, something stupid. *For the gospel of the cross is good for nothing to those who are perishing.* It means nothing to them.

For most people, the cross probably is good for nothing. It doesn’t fit into their program. If I attempted to tell them about it, they’d say, “That’s stupid.” This is exactly what Paul said: *The gospel of the cross is stupid to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

That word “power” is the Greek *dunamis*, from which we get our English word “dynamite.” *Dunamis* indicates the nth of power. Right now, according to our present scientific knowledge, the nth of power is fusion. Something else more powerful may be discovered in the future, but whatever the nth of power is, that’s what the gospel is according to Paul.

Two kinds of people come to the cross of Christ. To one, the cross of Christ is good for nothing—stupid. The other group come to it and find in it the atomic power of God to salvation.

If I were an artist, I'd paint a great barren field with not one sprig of green in it. Down through the center of that field would be coming a plowshare, a big disc plow, in the shape of a cross, digging deep into the earth, and throwing soil on one side and on the other.

For nearly two thousand years, the cross has come down through this world, turning mankind, as the dust of the earth, on one side and on the other. Men and women have come to that cross, looked at it, and said, "It's foolishness to me; it has no meaning for my life," and they have gone in one direction to their place. Others have come to this cross and found in it the power of God; it has saved them, and they have gone a different direction into eternity. Oh, I know, there are people who say, "I have my own opinion." That's fine, but your viewpoint of Jesus Christ and the cross will not change Him or that cross one bit—but it will change your eternal destiny. What you think of the cross tells who you are; it does not tell who He is or what the cross is. There have been too many down through the centuries who have found in the cross the power of God for the evaluation of little man to make any impression on it whatsoever.

A young couple went to Europe on their honeymoon. While in Paris, France, they went to the Louvre. When they found that it was a museum of art, they hurried down one corridor after another to find the exit. As they went out, one turned to the other and said, "It's ridiculous to charge so much to see all those old pictures!" Behind them an elderly gentleman tapped them on the shoulder and said, "I could not help overhearing what you said. I spend hours here every day. The Louvre has been here for several hundred years and when you come here, it is not on trial—you are on trial. What you think of it does not tell what the Louvre is; it does tell who you are."

Likewise, my friend, when you come to the cross of Christ, what you think of the cross won't affect it one whit. It is the dynamite of God that tells who *you* are, and it will tell your eternal destiny.

Let's look at some people who in some way participated in or witnessed the crucifixion of Christ, and we'll see how that cross separated them.

THE CROSS DIVIDED TWO ROMANS

Think of two people who were involved in Jesus' crucifixion: Pilate and the Roman centurion who crucified Christ. The cross divided these two men.

PILATE

Pilate was a puppet of Rome, a cheap politician. He didn't want to make a decision concerning Jesus—he made that adequately clear—but he also didn't want to offend the people. He was a typical politician, wanting to please everybody.

When they brought Jesus to him, at first he didn't quite understand what they really wanted. He brought Jesus into the judgment hall and said, "If You'll just cooperate with me, I can get You off. No problem." But he found out pretty quickly that the Lord Jesus was not going to cooperate. That made Pilate a little uneasy. So he went out to the people and said, "Look, this is just a religious matter, and I don't know much about your religion. You folks take it and settle it; don't turn it over to me!"

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The chief priests said, “We’re sorry, but we can’t settle it. We’re not permitted to give the death penalty, and that’s what we’re demanding.”

Pilate was startled and asked, “What has He done to merit death?”

“He has made Himself a king! We worship and honor Caesar—we don’t honor Him. We think He’s a traitor.”

Pilate said to Jesus again, “Come on inside and let’s talk this over.” When they were again inside the hall of judgment, Pilate said, “Now look, all You have to do is just say You’re not a king and that You don’t want to overthrow Rome. Just cooperate with me, we’ll go back out there, and I’ll have You freed in no time.” But Jesus wasn’t cooperating. So the third time he took Him inside, and again Pilate tried to get off the hook. It wasn’t Jesus trying to escape that day, it was Pilate. My friend, after you read the account with the perspective of nearly two thousand years of history, you can see that Jesus was not on trial; Pilate was the one on trial. Pilate was attempting to free himself, Jesus was not.

For example, the enemy had said, “We will not take Jesus during the feast because of the people. He is popular with the crowds, so we’ll wait until after the feast when the crowds are gone.” But the Lord Jesus, when He met with His own men, told them, “I’ll die during the feast.”

When did He die? He died on the feast day. He set the time of His death. My friend, He is a King all the way through. King Lear’s claim concerning himself, “Ay, every inch a king,” certainly applied to the Lord Jesus. He was every inch a King. He was in command even during His trial, and Pilate in desperation asked His accusers (imagine a judge today asking this), “What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?” (Matthew 27:22).

He couldn’t believe his ears when that crowd, that mob which had been coached and brainwashed, demanded, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him and release to us Barabbas”—the worst criminal he

had in incarceration. You see, this man Pilate thought he had a way out when he offered them Barabbas. He didn't know how base mankind could become—although he was very base himself. Pilate, thinking he could escape the guilt of it, called for a basin of water, and he washed his hands before them, saying, “I am innocent of the blood of this just Person” (Matthew 27:24). It's ironic that the oldest creed of the church still says, “Crucified under Pontius Pilate.” Pilate didn't escape. He had to make a decision relative to Christ. His decision was that Christ's death was good for nothing. I'm sure his thinking was, *He didn't have to die; I could have gotten Him off. That was stupid!*

There are two traditions concerning Pilate's life after this experience. One tradition is that he took his ill-gotten political gains and bought a villa up in northern Italy. One day he entertained guests from Palestine. After a sumptuous meal they walked through his spacious gardens, and one of the guests asked him, “Do you remember the trial of Jesus of Nazareth?” Pilate stroked his chin and answered, “No, I don't seem to recall it.”

The other tradition is that he began to travel. He had a bad conscience, and he couldn't get away from it. He ended up at the Pillar of Hercules, which was a jumping-off place, not only for the Roman Empire, but they thought it was the jumping-off place of the earth. It was a jumping-off place for Pilate, for he plunged to his death on the rocks.

Those are the two traditions that have come down to us. I don't know whether either of them is true, but I do know Pilate never forgot the trial of Jesus of Nazareth and that he went into eternity his way.

A ROMAN CENTURION

Now there was another man, a Roman official, involved at Jesus' crucifixion. His paychecks were signed by the same treasurer as Pilate; he had the same philosophy of life; he had the same

religion—he worshiped Apollo and the Caesar who was on the throne. On a certain day, there was delivered into his hand men to be crucified. The gospel records tell us about three who were crucified, but Sir William Ramsay, who made quite a study of this, says there were probably nearer to three hundred men crucified that day. You see, Rome was not in the *retail* business of crucifying; Rome was in the *wholesale* business of crucifying. Rome crucified thousands of men. But on this particular day, I suppose the centurion went out to his job and paid very little attention to the men he was executing until there came this one—Jesus.

Something very strange took place at the beginning. This centurion had been cursed in every language of the Roman Empire, and there were over one hundred languages. This man knew what it was to handle criminals at the time of death. On this day there was put into his hands Jesus of Nazareth. When he read the charges against Him, he couldn't believe it. Then he heard Jesus say, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). That alerted him to this Man, so he began to watch.

Mark gave us the crucifixion by the clock:

Now it was the third hour, and they crucified Him. And the inscription of His accusation was written above: THE KING OF THE JEWS. With Him they also crucified two robbers, one on His right and the other on His left. So the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And He was numbered with the transgressors." And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, "Aha! You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, "save Yourself, and come down from the cross!" Likewise the chief priests also, mocking among themselves with the scribes, said, "He saved others; Himself He cannot save. "Let the Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Even those who were crucified with Him reviled Him. Now when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the

ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” which is translated, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” –Mark 15:25-34

At 9:00, Jesus was put on the cross. For three hours there was physical light, but it was spiritual darkness. The last three hours, from 12:00 noon to 3:00 in the afternoon, there was physical darkness but spiritual light. In those first three hours, man did his *worst*; in the last three hours, God did His *best*. In the first three hours, man vented his hatred on this One who was dying there. They did everything they could think of to ridicule Him as He suffered. Then at 12:00 noon, God dropped down the mantle of night upon that cross as if to say to the world, “You can’t see how horrible this really is.”

Now, I know today there are ministers who depict the cross in all of its gory, bloody detail, but you won’t find any detail in the Word of God. God put the mantle of darkness down over that cross so we couldn’t see it.

Therefore, during the last three hours—hear me carefully—that cross became an altar on which “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” was offered (John 1:29). It was in those three hours that the Lord said through the prophet Isaiah, “It pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief” (Isaiah 53:10). During those three hours, He “who knew no sin [was made] to be sin for us” (2 Corinthians 5:21). He took your place and my place to die in our stead. That is the way God must treat sin and sinners. Although the Lord Jesus is the holy Son of God, in those three hours He bore the sin of the world. Then as light broke on that cross, I think the centurion looked at the most horrible sight he’d ever seen, because Isaiah said our Savior was bruised more than any man (see Isaiah 52:14). He must have looked terrible hanging there. This centurion stepped out from the crowd, took his place beneath the cross, and said, “Truly this Man was the Son of God” (Mark 15:39).

Now I know there are theologians who say that was not an adequate confession and that he couldn't join their church by saying only that. But let me remind you that the centurion was living up to the light he had up to that moment. He had come a long way. He never read any theology books or attended seminary, but although he didn't know a great deal, he knew enough to take his place beneath the cross of Christ. Do you know that all God has ever asked any sinner to do is to take his place beneath the cross of Christ? It's not how much you *know*, it's in whom you *believe*—that's what is important. And the centurion went into eternity a different way than how Pilate went.



WHEN YOU COME TO THE
cross of Christ,
WHAT YOU THINK OF THE CROSS
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- DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

THE CROSS DIVIDED TWO APOSTLES

The cross also divided two apostles who, six months before the Lord Jesus died, heard Him make the first announcement at Caesarea Philippi (according to the record) that He was going to Jerusalem to die. He outlined this in detail, saying, “I will be delivered into the hands of the Gentiles, I’ll be crucified, and I will be raised from the dead on the third day” (see Matthew 20:17-19). I don’t think they got the message—I don’t think any of the apostles did. On the way down from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem, five times (according to Matthew) He went over that ground again with them. The Son of Man was going to Jerusalem to die. As Dr. Luke put it, “He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). As He moved down toward Jerusalem, these men were wondering; but whatever He was going to do, they were all with Him. All but one—Judas.

Let’s see Judas and John in contrast. The reason I choose them is because they came closer to Christ than any other two. Judas kissed Him, and John reclined on His bosom. Although they both got close to Him, the cross divided them.

JUDAS

As they came down to Jerusalem, Judas bargained to betray Christ. I must confess, I really don't understand Judas—I never have. And I don't understand evil, either. Do you? Evil is complicated; goodness is simple. Let me illustrate this. Suppose I hold behind me a stick that is straight as an arrow, and I ask you to draw a picture of it. You would draw it exactly as it is, because there's only one way of being straight. But suppose I have a crooked stick behind me, and you draw it the way you think it appears. You couldn't possibly be accurate, because it can be crooked in a million different ways. I don't understand Judas—never quite figured him out. But I do know that the Lord Jesus gave him ample opportunity to turn to Him.

The theologians kick around the theory that Judas was predestined to betray Christ. I'll let them settle that, but I do know this: The Lord Jesus didn't turn against Judas even when he came that night with the crowd of armed men with the understanding that the one he kissed would be the one to arrest. When Judas kissed our Lord, Jesus said this strange thing to him, "Friend, why have you come?" (Matthew 26:50). In effect, He said, "Judas, you have now fulfilled prophecy, but it's not too late for you. I can still call you friend, because I'll be taking the penalty for your sin and dying for you in just a few hours." Judas had that opportunity to turn to Him in confession and repentance. When they led Jesus away through the temple to crucify Him, this man Judas came, threw the money down, and said, "I've betrayed innocent blood" (see Matthew 27:3, 4). But to whom did he confess? He confessed to the priests. Why didn't he fall down before *Jesus* and say, "Forgive me!" If he had, he would have been forgiven, but he did not. I don't understand him. Judas went into eternity his own way.

JOHN

John stands in sharp contrast to Judas. He's called the apostle of love, but he would get a great laugh out of that if he were here today. John was not the apostle of love. While it is true he did write the wonderful epistles that bear his name, and he did write, "For God so loved the world ..." (John 3:16), the Lord Jesus never called him an apostle of love. Jesus called him a son of *thunder* (see Mark 3:17)! Where did he get the name of an apostle of love? Well, I don't know, but some artist in the Middle Ages painted a picture of John with curls. (I would not want to face John after having done such a thing.) Ever since, he's been considered the ladylike apostle. Oh, my friend, John was a big, rugged fisherman—not quite an apostle of love.

What kind of man was John?

Now John answered and said, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow with us." But Jesus said to him, "Do not forbid him, for he who is not against us is on our side." –Luke 9:49, 50

Then later when the Samaritans did not receive Jesus into their village, the record tells us:

And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?" –Luke 9:54

Imagine him saying, "I think we ought to bring fire down from heaven and get rid of them!" Does that sound like the apostle of *love*? Another time, he and his brother James came to the Lord Jesus and he said something like, "Now these other men You have are fine, but James and I have talked it over and we want You to give us places of honor in Your kingdom—one on Your right hand and one on Your left" (see Mark 10:35-37). Does that sound like an apostle of love? But that was John.

However, that man stood yonder at the cross of Christ, and when Jesus was dying He turned over His mother to John's care. When John wrote his gospel, he could write:

And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name. –John 20:30, 31

John went into eternity by a different route than Judas. “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18).

THE CROSS DIVIDED WOMEN

Now I want to bring two women to the cross, both of whom came very close to it.

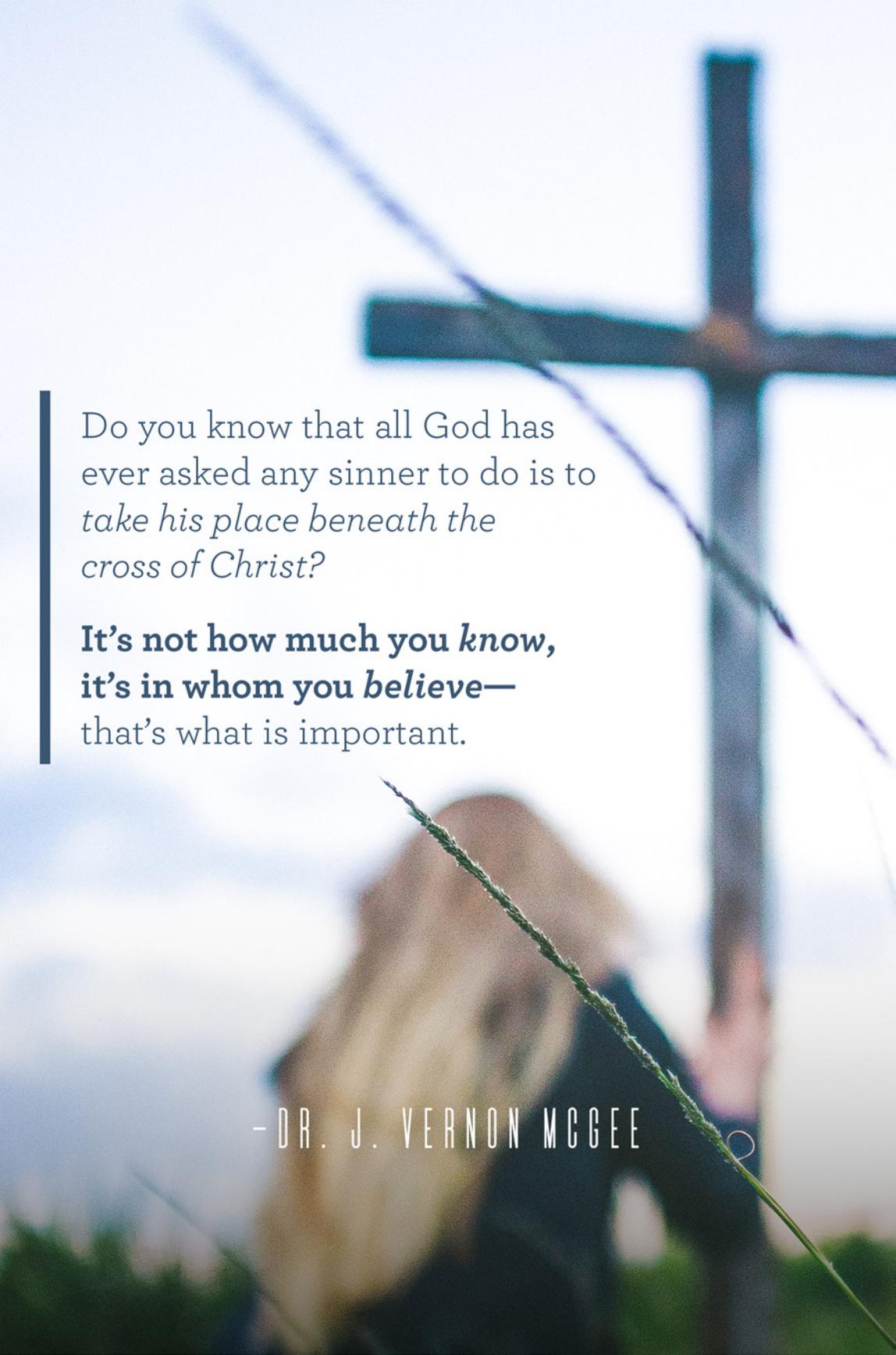
THE WIFE OF PILATE

We don't know much about the wife of Pilate. We only know that she was aware of the trial of Jesus, and she knew how her husband was involved. Not wanting him to be a part of it, she sent this word to him—and this is all we have:

While [Pilate] was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, "Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him."

—Matthew 27:19

She was superstitious. Throughout the Greco-Roman world were mystery religions in which women participated. In fact, they were the leaders in them. In the history of that era, some of the religions were the most immoral you can imagine. The initiations were unspeakable. For example, in the initiation of the Eleusinian mysteries, the female initiates would eat the flesh of a live bull until it was dead.



Do you know that all God has ever asked any sinner to do is to *take his place beneath the cross of Christ?*

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it's in whom you *believe*—
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Rome at this time seethed with superstitions. Pilate's wife revealed this influence. She said to him, "I dreamed about this man. Let's have nothing to do with Him." I think she gave Pilate the suggestion to wash his hands.

When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it." –Matthew 27:24

She was only a step away from the cross, but it meant nothing to her personally, for she was in superstition and ignorance. She went into eternity her own way.

MARY OF BETHANY

Mary of Bethany is one of the loveliest people in Scripture. Yonder at that supper at Bethany—which in one sense was Christ's last supper, a supper at which He met with His disciples and friends—Mary took her alabaster box of ointment, the most valuable thing she had, broke it, and poured the spikenard on the head and feet of Jesus. The disciples, inspired by Judas, began to rebuke her. In fact, they said to the Lord Jesus, "Why was this fragrant oil wasted?" (Mark 14:4). But our Lord reared a monument to her—not a monument of cold marble or brass, but a monument that is a sweet aroma. He said, "Wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her" (Mark 14:9). Her story has gone around the world many times and has made the world a little sweeter.

Jesus knew she had entered into His death. You can talk about the apostolic succession all you want to—I don't want to be in it. Those fellows had no understanding of His approaching suffering and death. But Mary brought the alabaster box, broke it, and poured the fragrance on Him as if to say, "I understand." And He said, "She has kept this for the day of My burial" (John 12:7). To her, the cross of Christ was not something from which to turn away. She found in it the power of God to salvation.

THE CROSS DIVIDED ENEMIES

Notice now the effect of the cross on the lives of two Pharisees who at first saw eye-to-eye, but who were divided; one went into eternity one way and the other another way.

The Pharisees were a religio-political party. As a religious party, they were what we would classify as fundamental in the faith. They believed in the inspiration of the Old Testament, the existence of the supernatural, the existence of angels, and the Resurrection. In our day, they could be classified as “cold-blooded fundamentalists.” Although they believed the Word of God, their lives did not evidence its influence. How easy it always has been to simply say, “Yes, I believe,” without the Word actually affecting the heart!

When the Pharisees came into the presence of Christ, they were much impressed by Him and felt that He was the One they wanted. They sent Nicodemus to Him, thinking that somehow they would win Him over to their side. They soon found, however, that they couldn't. Rather, He was attempting to win them over to His side—and they didn't like that. Gradually, the Pharisees became His enemies, and in the end they joined with the Herodians in the plot to nail Him to a cross.

PHARISEE NUMBER ONE

I'm confident one of the Pharisees was an enemy of the Lord Jesus Christ all the way through. One Sabbath day, he invited the Lord Jesus home to dinner. You would think if this man invited Jesus to dinner, he couldn't be His enemy. Oh, yes, he could! His invitation was not a gesture of friendliness. He invited our Lord to dinner in order that his crowd might find something with which they could charge Him.

The fact of the matter is they planted a crippled man at the door, knowing our Lord would heal him (and He did), even though it was the Sabbath day. (His enemies inadvertently paid Him the finest compliment.)

Now it happened, as He went into the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees to eat on the Sabbath, that they watched him closely. And behold, there was a certain man before Him who had dropsy. –Luke 14:1, 2

They ganged up on Him, and His host was the chief, leading the opposition against Him. In no sense was his invitation to dinner an expression of friendship. You know, when someone invites you to dinner, it means they're your friend. That is one place where you never are to be betrayed. One of the worst breaches of etiquette, in fact, one of the lowest things a person can do, is to betray one whom he has invited into his home for dinner.

But this Pharisee, a scheming rascal, soon found he had a guest who could take care of Himself. In fact, when dinner was announced, our Lord watched as the guests took their places at the table. There were no place cards in those days, so they all tried to get the chief place. When He came in and sat down—probably in the lowest place—He said something like this: “When you're invited to dinner, don't try to get the highest place; go to the lowest place. Then in case your host feels that you ought to be moved up, you will be honored when he comes to you and taps you on the shoulder and moves you to a place of honor. But it's

rather embarrassing to have managed to elbow your way into a good spot and then have the host say, ‘Wait a minute, you have Mr. So-and-So’s place. I want you to come around here and take the last place at the table.’” (See Luke 14:7-11.) So he corrected their manners.

Christ had gone to the home of an enemy, a ruler of the Pharisees. This man joined with those who crucified Him. When he looked at the cross and the crowd beneath it, this Pharisee said, “It’s foolishness—I see nothing in that cross.” So he went into eternity his own way.

PHARISEE NUMBER TWO

Now I want to introduce to you another Pharisee who eventually came to the Lord Jesus. He probably was the greatest enemy the Lord Jesus Christ ever had. I don’t believe anyone has ever hated Christ as Saul of Tarsus hated Him. I don’t believe Justin the Apostate hated Him as intensely as did Saul. He was a Pharisee of the Pharisees, the best prospect they had. He was a young man who had been trained in the best school, the school of Gamaliel. He was brilliant, probably one of the most brilliant men the world has ever produced—so much so that Festus the governor said, “Much learning doth make thee mad.” He was an educated man, and he *hated* Jesus.

Although Scripture is silent on this point, I think he was present at the crucifixion of Jesus. We know how much Saul hated Him. We know that after the death and resurrection of Christ, and after the Day of Pentecost when the church began and persecution broke upon it, the man who led the persecution was Saul of Tarsus. All the other Pharisees, when the Christians had been driven out of Jerusalem, seemed satisfied and didn’t care about pursuing them any further. But Saul of Tarsus went to the chief priest and asked that he be given letters to the synagogues in Damascus, for he had heard that Christians had gone that way and he didn’t intend to rest until he was assured everyone who

named the name of Jesus was either imprisoned or put to death. He hated them because he hated Christ. Imagine this brilliant young Pharisee, hating Jesus as he did and as energetic as he was, staying home on the day of the crucifixion, saying, "Well, I have some studying to do that day." No, I think he joined that group of Pharisees that sat down, shot out the lip, and mocked Jesus as He hung on the cross.

Later, on the way to Damascus with papers, breathing out threats, hating the Christians and hating Christ, the Lord Jesus waylaid him, knocked him down into the dust. Saul of Tarsus found out that Jesus of Nazareth was alive and that He was his Savior and the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. And he yielded his heart and life to Jesus Christ (see Acts 9:1-16). Years later he wrote, "He loved me and gave Himself for me" (see Galatians 2:20). I believe he was remembering that day he stood ridiculing beneath the cross and heard Jesus say, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). He thought he knew what he was doing. At that time, the cross was foolishness to him, but years later he declared "it is the power of God to salvation" (Romans 1:16). It transformed his life.

Two Pharisees came to the cross. One of them said, "It's foolishness," and he went into eternity his way. Another Pharisee came to the cross, and for him it had no meaning. But then he met the One who died on that cross, and was able to say, "He loved me and gave Himself for me ... for the preaching of the cross is foolishness to those who perish, but to us who are saved it's the power of God" (see Galatians 2:20 and 1 Corinthians 1:18).



**The cross is the sign
of God's redeeming grace.**

**Multitudes have come to it
and have found the
power of God.**

- DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

THE CROSS DIVIDED EVEN THIEVES

Now I want to bring just one other couple to the cross. These two men were there, hanging on crosses on either side of the Lord Jesus Christ. The cross divided the two thieves—and I do mean in the sense that one was on the left and one was on the right. But the cross also divided the two thieves for eternity.

What was the difference between them? Both had been tried before a Roman court, both were convicted for the same kind of crime, both merited capital punishment, and they both agreed that it was a right sentence. So what was the difference between the two thieves? Years ago, I asked that question in a summer Bible school and this bright little fellow answered, “One of them was a good thief and one was a bad thief.” I am of the opinion that a great many people today think that was the difference. But thieves come in only one classification—*bad*. There is no such thing as a good thief. Both of these men were bad, and both at the beginning ridiculed Christ.

I have another question: To what church did the two thieves belong? What ceremony did they go through? Don't misunderstand me, I was a pastor for forty years, and I believe in the local church and in baptism, but what about those two thieves? They were divided, but what divided them?

I used to play handball with a fellow preacher. Although we were friends, we were on opposite sides of the fence as far as theology was concerned. I asked him one day, "What would you tell that thief on the cross to do in order to get to heaven?"

He said, "I don't know."

"Well, you had better hurry and tell him something, because he's dying."

"I don't know, I guess he would be the exception."

I said, "Don't you think he might be the *rule* that is being set for time and eternity? Are you going to tell him to perform some good works with his hands? If you said that, you'd mock him. He would say, 'Look, my hands are nailed to the cross, and they'll not be taken down except in death.' Would you tell him to run errands of mercy? He would reply, 'Again, you mock me! My feet are nailed to this cross.' What are you going to say to him?"

That thief who started out ridiculing Christ came to the conclusion that the One dying on that central cross was not only innocent, but He was dying for somebody else. In fact, He was dying for *him*, and He was in contact with God. So he in faith looked to Him and said, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). He had nothing to offer but his simple faith. To that man, whom society said was not fit to live on this earth, the Lord Jesus said, "Today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). One thief went with Christ; the other went the other way.

*Three men shared death upon a hill,
But only one man died,
A thief and God Himself made rendezvous.
Three crosses still
Are borne up Calvary's hill
Where sin still lifts them high.
Upon the one, hang broken men who cursing die;
The other holds the praying thief.
And those as penitent as he
Still find the Christ beside them on the tree.*

-Author unknown

YOU

What do you see in the cross? An innocent man dying unjustly? Or do you see the cruelty of the execution and your heart goes out in pity? How kindly I want to say this: He said to the daughters of Jerusalem, “Do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves” (Luke 23:28). He does not want your sympathy.

Can you see in the cross of Christ what the dying thief saw? What John the beloved saw? What the Apostle Paul saw? The cross is the sign of God’s redeeming grace. Multitudes have come to it and have found the power of God.

My friend, what does the cross mean to you? Have you really turned to Christ? He is the One who died for you, rose again, paid the penalty for your sins, lives today in glory, and is returning to earth someday. Have you really trusted Him?

For the [gospel] of the cross is [stupid; good for nothing] to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God [to salvation]. –1 Corinthians 1:18

A photograph of two men, one Black and one white, smiling and talking to each other outdoors. They are gesturing with their hands as if in conversation. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people in a park-like setting.

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A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone. The phone screen displays a list of booklets from the TTB.org website. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a wooden table.

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