

INTRODUCTION

Some faces are pretty recognizable, most of the time. As you know, the late actor Paul Newman started a line of food products that generously gives the proceeds to charity. He started a camp in Connecticut for children with serious illnesses and their families.

There's a true story about how he stopped by one day to have lunch with them. On the table was a carton of his Paul Newman lemonade. He sat down beside a little boy and the boy said, "Mister, who are you?" Paul Newman pointed to his face on the carton. The boy looked at him and said, "Are you lost or something?"

Paul Newman loved to talk about the kids there who didn't have a clue who he was. He could have gone through life asking, "Don't you know who I am?" Instead he loved hanging out with the kids who thought he only made spaghetti sauce and lemonade.

Today we're going to look into the faces of several of the people who gathered at Golgotha the day Jesus was crucified; some are recognizable and others are unnamed.

In order to get the context, let's remember that Jesus has been on trial before the Jewish authorities and then before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Jesus was taken by the Roman soldiers and flogged, and beaten and had a crown of thorns on His head. We know from Matthew, Mark, and Luke that it is now about 9:00 a.m.

John 19:17-27: Carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called Place of the Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha (*Calvaria* in Latin). There they crucified him and two others with him, one on either side, with Jesus in the middle. Pilate also had a sign made and put on the cross. It said: Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. Many of the Jews read this sign, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek. So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Don't write, 'The king of the Jews,' but that he said, 'I am the king of the Jews.'" Pilate replied, "What I have written, I have written."

When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, a part for each soldier. They also took the tunic, which was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So they said to one another, "Let's not tear it, but cast lots for it, to see who gets it." This happened that the Scripture might be fulfilled that says: They divided my clothes among themselves, and they cast lots for my clothing. [Psalm 22:18] This is what the soldiers did.

Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple he loved standing there, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.

The first face I want us to consider is Golgotha itself, *Calvary* in Latin. It was called the place of the skull for one main reason. There is a sheer rock cliff about a half a mile north of the Damascus gate. Hebrews 13 tells us Jesus was crucified outside the gate. This was one a main north south road that thousands of pilgrims and travelers would pass on their way to and from North Africa.

The rock cliff looks like the face of a skull. This is a picture taken in the 1960s, and you can easily see the eye sockets, nose and mouth. Today it is beside a busy Arab bus station lot. In the past forty years that I have been visiting this site, pollution and vandalism have eroded the face of the skull. One can only imagine how much it looked like a skull 2,000 years ago. So Jesus wasn't crucified up on top of the cliff, but in front of it. It makes us rethink the words "on a hill far away stood an old rugged cross." Instead we should actually sing, "in front of a hill far away stood an old rugged cross."

I also want to briefly consider the sign Pilate placed on the cross above Jesus' head. Every person crucified had their crime listed on a sign: murderer, thief, insurrectionist. But Pilate made a sign with four main words: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. He had it written in Hebrew because that's the language of religion, it was in Greek, which was the language of culture; and in Latin which was the language of governmental power. Jesus is King over religion, culture, and power.

But have you ever wondered why the Jewish leaders got so upset at what Pilate wrote? Many scholars believe Pilate was using an acrostic to shame the Jewish leaders. There are many acrostics in the Hebrew language including Psalm 119 and in Lamentations. You read Hebrew from right to left, so the first letter of each of the four words are the letters YHWH. For those of you who know your Old Testament, those four consonants make up the Covenant name of God—Yahweh, or transliterated—Jehovah. Perhaps Pilate was sticking his finger in the eyes of the Jewish leaders by writing GOD over the head of the crucified Savior!

With that introduction, let's look at the faces at Golgotha. We'll look at three groups, and one miraculous individual.

1. THE GUILTY THIEVES

Jesus was crucified between two thieves. This was a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy in Isaiah 53 that Messiah would be "numbered with the transgressors."

Luke tells us that one of the thieves was afraid to die and cried out, "If you are the Messiah, save yourself and us!" But the other criminal said, "Be quiet, we're getting what we deserve, but this man is innocent." Then, this unnamed outlaw turned to Jesus and made one of the most remarkable professions of faith in all of history.

"Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' And he said to him, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.'" (Luke 23:42-43)

We can learn a great deal from this unknown brother. You will never be saved by good works, because this fellow was a guilty criminal and died before he could do good works. Yet he was with Jesus in Paradise that same day. Baptism doesn't save you, because our friend was never baptized, yet he was with Jesus in paradise that day.

Saving faith is seeing a King on a Cross.

I memorized Hebrews 11:1 in college and I've never forgotten it. "Now faith is the SUBSTANCE of things hoped for; and the evidence of things NOT SEEN." The thief on the cross was hoping for a future. He said, "Remember me when..." He believed Jesus had a future in which He would be able to remember him. Then he said, "When you come into your kingdom." He didn't say remember me when you come into THE kingdom, but YOUR kingdom.

Why did he make this request? I believe it's because he had heard Jesus say these words a little while earlier, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."

This dying man looked over a figure that had been tortured until He was hardly recognizable, and he saw Him as a King. That's saving faith. All he had to do was to cry out in faith to Jesus and that's enough. Where ever you are, and whatever you've done you can cry out to the King today. And He can give you the same promise, "Some day you will be with me in Paradise."

2. THE GREEDY SOLDIERS

Try to imagine the scene. While Jesus is hanging there in agony, five Roman soldiers are there, a Centurion and four enlisted men. These four enlisted men are rolling dice for the tunic. Crucifixion was hard work, the only benefit Roman soldiers got from this duty was that they could claim all the possessions of the criminal being crucified. Four soldiers got one item apiece: the headdress, the sandals, the outer robe, and the sash that served as a belt. But there was a fifth piece of clothing—the tunic. It was the undergarment Jewish men wore next to their skin. Because it was seamless, they gambled for it. They didn't realize they were fulfilling the scripture from 1000 years earlier when David had seen a vision of the crucifixion and described it in the 22nd Psalm. There are thirteen graphic prophecies of the crucifixion in Psalm 22.

It was seamless from top to bottom. The other reference to a seamless garment is from Exodus 28 where God gave instructions that the Jewish High Priest would wear a seamless garment. Jesus was our High Priest. The High Priest entered into God's presence in the Holy of Holies offering atonement for the sins of the people. He was the only man who could mediate between a Holy God and sinful man. He walked behind a thick curtain to hide the presence of God from everyone else. We're told in Matthew and Mark that the moment Jesus died, that curtain was ripped apart from top to bottom. On that day, the barrier between God and man was removed and Jesus became our High Priest. The Bible says in 1 Timothy 2:5, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind—the man Jesus Christ."

Many people are gambling with their eternity.

So what is the practical application? We think those soldiers had to be fools to gamble while Jesus was saving the world. Today we wonder how they could be so blind. There are thousands of people in East Texas who are just as blind as those Roman soldiers. They are gambling with their eternity—they are betting that Jesus isn't real, and that after death, they won't be held accountable for their sins.

There is a theological argument called "Pascal's Wager." It goes like this. Let's just suppose for the sake of argument that there is no God, the Bible isn't true, Jesus didn't rise from the dead, and death is just an entrance into nothingness. So if I'm a Christian and I die, what have I lost? Very little. But I gained much value in this life because I had hundreds of friends who I loved and loved me like a brother, I loved my neighbors, had a sense of inner peace, and I died believing I would be in a better place.

On the other hand, let's suppose that God is real, the Bible is true, and after death there is Heaven or Hell, and Jesus is the only way to Heaven. So here's an unbeliever who wagered that all of that is not true. If he loses the wager, what has he lost? He has lost everything for all eternity. A professional gambler would call that a stupid wager.

Albert Einstein once made a famous statement that I think applies to this. He said: "The difference between genius and stupidity is that genius has its limits." There is no limit to the foolishness of gambling with your eternity. There is too much at stake. I pray that you'll be like the fifth soldier, the Centurion who watched Jesus die and said, "Surely, this was the Son of God."

3. THE GRIEVING FRIENDS

According to John's description there were four women and the Apostle John himself there. Throughout this narrative John identifies himself as "the disciple Jesus loved." Three of the four women were named "Mary" which was a very common Jewish name from Miriam who was the sister of Moses.

Mary, the mother of Jesus must have been in anguish. Any of you parents who have ever had a child to die can relate to her pain and sorrow.

Thirty-three years earlier, eight days after the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph had taken the infant to be dedicated in the Temple. An old prophet by the name of Simeon. God had told him he wouldn't die until he laid eyes on the Messiah. That day when he took the baby Jesus in his arms, God revealed to him that this was the Messiah. He began to praise God and bless the child. Then he blessed Joseph and Mary. He said something to Mary that probably disturbed her. He said, "This child will mean the rise and fall of many—and a sword will pierce your soul."

There at the cross, I believe Mary finally understood those ominous words. Her heart was pierced as she watched Jesus suffer and die.

One of my favorite speakers and writers is Erwin Lutzer, the Pastor Emeritus of The Moody Church in Chicago. He has a beautiful way of describing the scene that day: "She who had planted kisses on the brow of that little Child, now saw that brow crowned with thorns. She who held those little hands as He learned to walk, now saw those hands pierced with nails. She who had cradled Him in her arms, now saw Him writhing alone on the garbage dump of Jerusalem. She who loved Him at birth, came to love Him even more in death."

And even as the life blood of Jesus was draining from His body, we see the care and compassion He had for His mother. He said, "Woman, look at your son." If that sounds harsh to use the word "woman" you probably didn't grow up the South. It's same thing as when we say, "Ma'am." We were taught to say, Yes, Ma'am. Thank you, Ma'am."

Then Jesus says to John, "Here's your new mom—take care of her for me." Jesus had siblings, half brothers and sisters, they had the same mother, Mary but different Fathers. In Mark 6 and Matthew 13, four of Jesus' half-brothers are even named. So why didn't they take care of their mother? Why did Jesus ask John to do it? The answer is simple. In John 7:5 we read that even Jesus' siblings didn't believe in Him. So Jesus wanted a believing disciple to care for His mother. In His time of agony, and in the moment of Mary's deepest pain, Jesus cared for her as only Jesus can. And the personal application for us is this:

Jesus cares for you during the most painful experiences of life.

When your heart is breaking, and your pain is overwhelming, you may wonder, "Does anyone know the pain I'm going through? Does anybody even CARE?" I'm here to tell you Jesus is aware of your pain and He cares for you. The Bible says you can "Cast our cares upon the Lord, because He cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7) Jesus said every hair of your head is numbered, and if God notices every time a sparrow falls to the earth, you can be sure He is watching over you! Are you going through a painful time right now? Does it feel as if a sharp sword has been plunged deeply into your soul? Just as He did for Mary, Jesus has opened His arms wide on the cross to let you know He cares for you.

Many of you have heard of Joni Eareckson Tada. When she was 18 years old she dove in the Chesapeake Bay not realizing the water was shallow. She broke her neck and has been a quadriplegic since and she has been encouraging Christians for the past forty years with her words, her art, and her music. She has a website now called Persevering through the Pandemic. And for those who are struggling, she finds the cross to be a source of hope. She writes: "You don't have to be alone in your hurt! Comfort is yours. Joy is an option. And it's all been made possible by your Savior. He went without comfort so you might have it. He postponed joy so you might share in it. He willingly chose isolation so you might never be alone in your hurt and sorrow." The final face we want to see is that of the:

4. THE GRACIOUS SAVIOR

It is the face of Jesus. We'll be looking at Him over the next two weeks. Next week we'll examine The Word Heard Around the World, "It is finished!" In two weeks, we'll talk about The

Water and the Blood. There are two things that stand out we when we consider Jesus on the cross:

(1) The cross reveals the ultimate example of Man's wickedness.

We see humanity at its worst and God at His best. I don't believe we can imagine the full horror of Roman crucifixion. It was the most agonizing form of execution in history. Beheading was swift; hanging was a quick death; death by firing squad was instantaneous. Even death by lethal injection is relatively hasty. The Persian Empire devised crucifixion about 300 years before Bethlehem. It was designed to be a slow, drawn-out, agonizing process. The Romans perfected it. They crucified thousands of criminals and left them hanging on trees as a reminder to others of the consequences of revolting against the Romans.

The Gospel writers don't go into minute detail about the crucifixion because all of their First-Century readers had witnessed the horror of crucifixion with their own eyes. We really don't have a modern frame of reference for it. It would be like me going back to the time of Jesus and saying there was a head-on collision on Loop 49 and none of the passengers were wearing seatbelts. You get the picture—but they wouldn't. We can't begin to imagine the wickedness and cruelty of Roman crucifixion.

No artist can come close to capturing the terror of Roman crucifixion. Consider this description by New Testament scholar John Phillips. The painting is by Peter Paul Rubens.

John Phillips wrote, "No crueler death has ever been devised by man. Everything about crucifixion was horrible. The excruciating pain, the unnatural position, the prolonged agony, sometimes dragging on for days. The heat, the thirst, the flies, the nakedness, the shame – and men did this to their Maker." (*Gospel of John*, p. 364)

But not only does the cross reveal the wickedness of humanity,

(2) The cross reveals the ultimate example of God's grace.

My definition of Grace is God giving us what we need instead of what we deserve. We deserve punishment for our sins; at the cross God knew we need pardon: that's grace. We deserve the cross; God knew we need cleansing: that's grace. We deserve the eternal fire; God knew we need eternal forgiveness: that's grace. We deserve hell; God knew we need Heaven: that's grace.

The Bible says, "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit." (1 Peter 3:18)

CONCLUSION

I read a story once about a little boy who was in Washington D.C. on the Washington Mall. There, rising in the middle between the Capitol Building and the Lincoln Memorial is the

Washington Monument. As the little boy stared up at it, a nearby park ranger said, "It's really something, isn't it?" The boy said, "It sure is. Mister, I'd like to buy it."

The ranger smiled and asked, "Well how much do you have to spend?" The boy pulled the change out of his pocket and said, "I've got 35 cents. Is that enough?"

The park ranger knelt beside the boy and said, "Son, you need to understand three important things. First, 35 cents isn't enough to purchase this monument, in fact, \$35 billion isn't enough to buy it. Second, the Washington monument is not for sale. And third, because you are a U.S. citizen, you already own it."

With that story in mind, there are three things about salvation that you need to know. First, all the money in the world can't buy salvation. Second, salvation isn't for sale. And third, because of God's grace you already possess forgiveness when you place your faith in Jesus.

What is your reaction to the cross. Every time I see it, I am moved to give my life more fully to Christ. I love the words of the old hymn that says: "See from His Head; His Hands; His feet— Sorrow and love flow mingled down. Did 'ere such love and sorrow meet? Or thorns compose so rich a crown. Were the whole realm of nature mine; That were a present far too small. Love so amazing, so Divine—Demands my life, my soul, my all!"

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