

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

17 Why Didn't the Disciples Understand Calvary?

Scripture: Luke 18:31-34:

Jesus Christ died by crucifixion outside the wall of Jerusalem in the Spring of the year 33 A.D. It came as no surprise to him. Jesus had repeatedly spoken about his death to those who were closest to him. It would require several pages to record all that he had to say about his death at Jerusalem, but the following are adequate for our thinking. *"The bread I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."* (John 6:51)

"I lay down my life for the sheep." "I lay down my life that I might take it again." "I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again." (John 10:15, 17, 18) *"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up...He spake of the temple of his body."* (John 2:18-22) *"The Son of man shall be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."* (Matthew 12:39-40) *"The Son of man shall be betrayed into the hands of men: and they shall kill him, and the third day he shall be raised-again."* (Matthew 17:22-23; 20:18-19) In Luke 9:31 we read of Moses and Elias, *"Who appeared in glory, and spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem."* Luke 9:51 says, *"When the time was come that he should be received up, he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem."* The inevitability of Calvary is also mentioned in Matthew 16:21, 17:12b and in Luke 18:31-34.

Jesus repeatedly and clearly spoke of his death. Yet, his followers did not grasp what he meant. An unusual incomprehensibility marked their thinking so that they did not understand the plain language with which the Lord spoke. Luke 18:34 explains why. *"And they understood none of these things: and this saying was hid from them, neither knew they the things which were spoken."* Luke informs us that the meaning of Calvary was *"hid from them."* A kind of veil was to blanket their thinking dulling their capacity to understand what Jesus was telling them. We can only conjecture as to the reason for this. **First**, that God's eternal plan be fulfilled and that Christ die as a substitute satisfying God's law. Jesus was to be the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. The disciples were not to stand in the way of this plan being fully accomplished. **Secondly**, it was kept from them in order that men by wicked hands might lay hold of Jesus.

Paul is correct when he writes that if they had known the Prince of Life or the identity of Christ, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory. (I Corinthians 2:8) Their decision to crucify Christ was the exercise of a lesser sovereignty granted to them, but which was embraced by the greater plan of God. **Thirdly**, it was kept from them in order that God might equal man's worst deed with infinite love and mercy. The sin of the Jews would become the riches of the nations. This blindness extended beyond the disciples and embraced even those who put Christ to death. It was for this reason that Christ prayed on the cross, *"Forgive them, for they know not what they do."* This was literally so.

Death by crucifixion has been considered the worst and most painful of all deaths. Actually, there are human torments which are greater than those endured through crucifixion. We can determine that it is a very slow and brutal death and most humiliating because of public exposure. There is the shouldering of the thirty to forty pound patibulum or crossbeam, the spectacle of being driven in public parade, the nailing of the victim's extremities, the piercing distortion, and the attendant extreme thirst. There is the indirect pain of humiliation which comes through the nudity, mock trials, spitting, jeering, scourging and that of being forsaken, abandoned to hang sometimes for several days as a public example and warning. This much is generally understood about the death of Jesus. At the same time, there is much which both was and is not understood about the death of Jesus. It is the purpose of this study to examine those strange words found in Luke 18 and to speak of the meaning of Calvary.

I. THERE ARE THOSE FOR WHOM CALVARY HAS LITTLE MEANING:

A. The Prophets Did Not Understand Calvary:

The death of a suffering Messiah was clearly foreseen and told by the prophets of Old Testament times. The sacrifices according to the law prefigured the suffering servant of the Lord. The principles associated with blood sacrifice anticipated the cross. Calvary was foreshadowed in the Passover and the Day of Atonement. We have the suffering of the Messiah described in Psalm 22. *"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"* (Psalm 22:1, 6-8, 16-18) Psalm 69 also describes the sufferings of the Messiah. Isaiah 52:12-53:11, delineates the sufferings. Daniel 9:26 and Zechariah 13:6-7 refer to it. Yet, the prophets did not understand what they wrote. They searched to determine the meaning of what was revealed to them by the Holy Spirit. I Peter 1:10 informs us, *"Of which*

salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesize of the grace that should come unto you."

B. The Apostles Did Not Understand Calvary:

On many occasions Jesus told his disciples about his coming suffering, death, and the fact that he would be shamefully treated and scourged. Peter once exclaimed, *"Far be it from thee, Lord. This shall not be unto thee."* This same Peter attempted to defend his Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane because he did not understand what had to happen. It was for this reason that the hearts of the apostles were broken and their hopes appeared blasted away when Jesus uttered his final cry from the cross. Of course, understanding of Calvary was granted to these men following the resurrection when the Lord opened the Scriptures to them. Through Pentecost and the illumination of their minds wrought by the Holy Spirit, their minds were guided into the fullness of truth, all the pieces began to fall together in an understandable way for them. They went forward with burning hearts declaring that the death and resurrection of Christ constituted the Gospel. It should be mentioned here that possibly two people had some insight to what was going on at Calvary. Mary of Bethany broke her alabaster box against the day of his burying (Matthew 26:6-12), and the penitent thief who envisioned the Lord's kingdom and requested that he be remembered. (Luke 23:42) We may assume that God the Father and Christ understood what was occurring on Calvary.

C. Those Who Crucified Christ Did Not Understand Calvary:

I have already made reference to the Lord's cry about his tormentors not knowing what they were about. Pilate questioned Christ, *"Art thou a king?"* (Matthew 27:11) When he finally condemned Christ to be scourged and crucified, he did so without knowing the answer to his question. The Pharisees demanded that he come down from the cross. They did so not knowing why he could not. (Mark 15:32)

Having spoken of those for whom Calvary has had little meaning, let me go on to say that there is a great deal about Calvary which can never be known. The mystery of Calvary has to do with God taking into His experience what is known to us as death. We must remember that Jesus was the pre-existing Son of God whose activities were with the Father

from eternity. We can only wonder what happened with the fellowship of the Trinity when Christ cried, *"My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"* How exactly did the eternal God experience death? What depths of suffering did Christ know when he endured the curse of the broken law? (Galatians 3:13) How is it possible to survive carrying the holiness of God in motion against sin which has been damned up for centuries? (Romans 3:25-26) How can one person experience spiritual death for every person who has ever lived? (Hebrews 2:14) Where will language be found to explain these things? Indeed, we will never know the fullness of truth about our redemption in this life. We cannot here know *"the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge."* (Ephesians 3:18-19)

II. THOSE FOR WHOM CALVARY HAS THE WRONG MEANING:

There is certain truth about Calvary which can be apprehended by believers. Such understanding eludes those who are not regenerate. (I Corinthians 2:14) The natural mind repudiates the thought of God dying on a cross. Calvary is thus approached from directions other than Scripture. Natural wisdom will seek to understand Calvary in ways which seem reasonable never realizing that truth at this point is shut up to babes, those whose minds have been renewed in regeneration. It is amazing how problems vanish when this happens. When the central problem of the cross has been settled, other admittedly difficult areas of theology are more easily dealt with. Various erroneous views of the cross have been held to through the years. In order for us to have a clearer grasp of what happened at Calvary, it is helpful to realize what didn't happen.

A. The Accident Misinterpretation:

This view recognizes that all men die one way or another and this is what happened to Christ. Christ, quite by chance, over involved himself with the fostering of his convictions upon others which resulted in his death. Unfortunately, he was a good man and had he been more discreet, his death would not have taken place in such a brutal way. It was an unfortunate coming together of peoples at the wrong time and place. The truth is that Christ came to die. (Matthew 16:21-23, 17:22, 20:17-19; Mark 9:30-32; Luke 9:44-45, 22:19-23; John 12:32-34, 13:20)

B. The Martyr Misinterpretation:

We all know what a martyr is. Martyrs give their lives because of what they believe in. They emerge across the pages of history as examples of

fidelity to truth and duty. This view perverts every basic teaching about Christ we have. The Father's withdrawal was not from one doing so noble a deed. (John 12:27; Matthew 11:29; 26:37-39) This view ignores completely the Scriptural teaching about atonement and propitiation. Man alone must atone for his deeds is the misrepresentation here. Christ's example will teach people do the best they are capable of with their lives.

C. The Moral Influence Misrepresentation:

This is a modification of the prior view. Christ was willing to suffer with a suffering creation and with suffering people. It is only love which will cause people to ask forgiveness as hearts are softened. Christ came into collision with the world's evil and he bore the result of that daring. He loved people so much he gave himself in the act. We are to love God back because he first loved us. It is true that God's love is seen in the person and work of Christ, but the work of Christ goes beyond a passion play. God forgives, not only because we ask to be forgiven, but because there is grounds by which the demands of his holiness have been met. (Hebrews 2:17, 9:14; Romans 3:25-26; I John 2:2; 4:10. How were Old Testament people forgiven without the example of Christ to follow?

D. The Governmental Misrepresentation Theory:

This view is not unlike the first three in that it has no quality in the divine nature that needs satisfying. However, the view suggests that God did maintain respect for the breaking of his law by making an example of his hatred for that disobedience in the death of Christ. Christ's death shows that God hates sin. The death of Christ was not a precise penalty for the broken law, but God accepted it nevertheless. The suggestion has been made that it is as if a man embezzled \$100,000 from his employer and is set free by the judge with the payment of \$100.00 by an innocent friend. Christ did not suffer the identical penalty that the sinner must suffer, but that he did suffer an equivalent penalty is the answer to this view. This view also overlooks satisfying the holiness of God and makes repentance the only condition for forgiveness. It does not explain the intensity of Christ's sufferings. (Mark 15:23; Luke 22:44; Matthew 27:46)

These are unscriptural views of Christ's atonement at Calvary. They arise from a basic antipathy toward substitutionary atonement and the shedding of blood

for the remission of sin. It is a person's basic bias and philosophical predilection which gives these views their appeal.

III. THERE ARE THOSE FOR WHOM CALVARY HAS MUCH MEANING:

Calvary is understood in the framework of theistic theology. There is a Divine reason for what happened at the place of the skull so long ago. Holiness is an attribute of the true and living God. Calvary must be understood in the light of God's justice which had to be satisfied if God is truly holy. Justice in motion against disobedience is God's wrath which was poured out upon Christ at Calvary. (Romans 8:32; Ephesians 2:15-16; II Corinthians 5:19) Another attribute of God is Mercy. Because God loved, he was moved with compassion to act on man's behalf. God is also very wise. Wisdom designed a way in which love and justice could meet. It happened at Calvary. There could be no other way. That is why Christ declared in Gethsemane, *"If it be possible, let this cup pass from me."* All of the attributes of God were satisfied despite man's waywardness. Indeed, God *"spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all."* (Romans 8:32)

To the Christian Calvary means **salvation**. It is the only way to come to a holy God and find acceptance. It is to come through one who was equally holy and whose holiness could be extended to others. This is the essence of the Christian Gospel which is set forth throughout the New Testament.

Secondly, Calvary is a **strengthening** factor in daily life. It is the slaying power of the cross which enables one to overcome the old nature which will hound all believers till the end of their days on earth. This is the meaning of Paul's words in Galatians 2:20, *"I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me."*

Lastly, Calvary is a way of **service**. This principle is set forth by Christ in the words, *"Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit."* Here the believer voluntarily assumes a place of self-denial, sacrifice, and hardship for Christ. Only as believers are willing to follow this pattern given by Christ in his acceptance of the cross, are they able to serve effectively.

Alan B. Christensen, Pastor, Hope Evangelical Free Church, Wilton, CT,
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