



FAMILY STUDY

Three Crosses

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"Three Crosses"

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There is only one God. But one dark Friday in Jerusalem two thousand years ago, there were three crosses. It was the day upon which the Son of God would complete His work and pay in full the price for our salvation. It was a price which could be paid by no less than the piercing of His flesh and the spilling of His blood. But as the unrelenting Roman soldiers led our Lord to Golgotha, where He would complete His work for the salvation of all those who would accept Him, there were two other men also—condemned men, being led to the same hill, so it seemed, for the same purpose.

One God. Three crosses. Why? Wouldn't a God that seeks our full attention have preferred the crucifixion of His Son to be the only execution performed that day? Wouldn't God have preferred that the world's focus on that day would fall exclusively on His Son? Yet, Jesus was not the only man crucified that Friday. Instead, He shared the spotlight with two common criminals. Couldn't God, in His sovereignty, have ensured that Jesus be crucified alone, preventing the world's focus from being shifted away from the work that was being fulfilled?

Yet there were three crosses. One God, and two guilty men. Puzzling? Confusing? Think about it. Even in eternity's darkest hour, God provided the world with a mirror image of itself—not through the center cross, but through the other two. You see, they were the reason Jesus was on HIS cross.

We're not given the names of the other two men crucified alongside of Jesus. We don't know much about who they were or what they had done. Were they married? How old were they? Did they have children? Was this their first offense or their tenth? We don't know. And yet, despite the tiny bit of information we have about them, we know exactly who these two men are. They are you and me. They are all of humanity.

Three crosses. All three men were just where they were supposed to be, hanging on a cross to die. But only two men were there because they were guilty. The Man in the middle, however, hung on His cross of a different reason. He hung there because the other two were guilty. He hung there because WE are guilty. The criminals were there to die. But Jesus was there to give them life, to give you and I life.

Neither criminal understood why Jesus was there or what He was doing for them. As they hung on those trees, both criminals hurled insults at Jesus (Matthew 27:44). They mocked Him. They ridiculed Him. They painted Him as a fool.

"So, you're the Christ, are you?" One of them gasped with razor-sharp sarcasm. "Then prove it, Messiah! Save yourself! Save us!" (Luke 23:39) If only this condemned robber had known how much truth there was in his own words. In the end, it was not a crucifixion that would seal his fate. It was a cold and defiant heart.

But somewhere along the way, a change of heart occurred in the other man. And instead of insulting Jesus along with the other criminal as he had been at first, he was coming to an awesome realization. Despite all the pain and agony and humiliation of a Roman crucifixion, something remarkable had happened in his heart, and He finally understood. The Man who had been nailed to the cross beside him was no ordinary man. Maybe, just maybe, The Man beside him was exactly who He said He was—the Son of God Himself. And instead of heaping more insults upon Jesus, he rebuked the other criminal who had been mocking Jesus.

"Don't you fear God," he said, "since you and I are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." (Luke 23:40-42)

Did you catch that? The very man who had been sentenced to death alongside of Jesus—the very man who in his last hours of tortured life had defiantly mocked the Son of God, was now...a believer! Listen to what he said: "Don't you fear God..."

God? Yes! He had come to believe. Somehow, this robber had come to realize that he was hanging on a cross right beside the Almighty Himself.

"We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve..." Punished justly? A confession of guilt from a condemned man? Repentance!

"But this man has done nothing wrong..." Somehow, he knew that the perfect Lamb of God hung beside him!

"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Kingdom? How could Jesus come into a kingdom unless He was a king? But somehow, this criminal had come to believe that He was. And with only four humble sentences and a sincere heart, he became a part of Jesus' Kingdom.

This convict was never baptized. He never took communion. He never became a member of a church or joined the choir. For all we know, he may not have done a single good deed in all his life. He hung there on his cross, naked for all the world to see. There was no way to hide what he really was. He had absolutely no hope of reprieve. All he had was four humble sentences and a sincere heart.

He could neither fool Jesus nor justify himself. All he could do was all that was needed. He admitted his guilt and repented. He acknowledged Jesus as Lord, the perfect and spotless Lamb of God. He asked Jesus to remember him when He came into His kingdom. Those words spoken by the robber were words he desperately needed to say, carrying with them so many other statements: "I am guilty." "You are God." "I need you." "Forgive me." "Save me." "I'm yours." He acknowledged that he needed a Savior, and asked Jesus to be that Savior. He directly made his plea to the only One who could save him.

Jesus neither challenged the robber's worthiness nor rebuked him for daring to ask God for salvation. Indeed, Jesus knew exactly what kind of man this robber was. Yet, in spite of the fact that this guilt-ridden man could never be worthy to enter God's kingdom, Jesus granted his request, simply because he had asked, and just because He loved him.

Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:43) There was no pause or hesitation in the Lord's reply to the robber. The criminal's request was eagerly granted by the Lamb of God, and the convict's guilt was erased, and the guilty became the forgiven.

A picture of all the world hung on those three crosses that day. God in the center, longing for the love of two kinds of criminals. For in the end, there are only two kinds of people in this world. The guilty and defiant, and the guilty but forgiven. On either side of our Lord hung two equally guilty men, distinguished from each other only by an act of repentance and trust in the One True God. The defiant robber never repented. He went to his grave with a heart full of hatred and rebellion, mocking the only One who could save him. And he died, never to see God again, living even now in eternal torment.

But as the other man died alongside of Jesus, he had in his heart the excitement and anticipation of a promise fulfilled. Now, his was a totally different destiny—not because he had lived a good life, or even because he wished he had. Guilty as he was, he understood that the Son of God hung on the cross beside him. He realized that he could enter God's kingdom even after he died. He knew that Jesus' death would not be final, because a dead man cannot establish a kingdom.

There was no time to be baptized. No fancy prayers. No ceremonies or rituals. No way to undo the evils that had been done. No room for lip service. No, there was only time for repentance and acceptance, delivered through four humble sentences from a sincere heart.

And then it was finished, recorded in Scripture for you and I to see, just as God had intended all along. He didn't just want you to know the facts of His Son's death. He wanted to show you why. He wanted you to know how much you mean to Him.

Three crosses. All the world hangs on two of them—the guilty and defiant, or the guilty and repentant. And in the middle, the Innocent, the Spotless, the Lord, who hung there not because of His guilt, but because of ours. Yours and mine. We all deserve a cross. Indeed, we all bear a cross. Yet, it is left to us to choose whether it will be the cross of defiance and rebellion or the cross of repentance and forgiveness.

So, lest we forget what Jesus' death on the cross means to us today, just remember, there were two other crosses beside Him that Friday at Golgotha. And they were put there to remind us what the cross in the middle was there for: not to cause death, but to bring life.

One God, but three crosses.
Two to teach you.
And one to bring you life.