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The People Around The Cross

Readings

Mark 15:20, 24, 27, 29, 31, 39, 40, 41; Luke 23:48; John 19:25, 26

Introduction

Many of us were brought up in homes where we went to Sunday school and were taught the message of the Lord on the cross. We may have even read about it directly in the scriptures or in books given for prizes from Sunday School attendance or scriptural memorization. However, due to hearing the message often that “Christ died for our sins” (1 Cor. 15:3), as time passed it can possibly become a series of clinical facts. Finding this in myself, I began a renewed meditation on the cross of our Lord.

The Doubles Surrounding The Passion of The Lord

One of the first observations is that the people around the cross of our Lord were divided into two groups, those which complemented each other and those which were distinctly different.

- a) The ones which were complementary:
 - i) Two political leaders who passed the Lord off to each other, Pilate (Lk. 23:7) and Herod (Lk. 23:11). Each tried to avoid Him by passing His judgment off to the other. To each He meant little, He was simply a curiosity.
 - ii) Two groups of sympathizing women, those who stood near the cross (Jn. 19:25) and those who stood afar off (Mk. 15:40).
 - iii) Two groups who had no interest why He was being crucified; the passers by who mocked (Matt. 27:39) and the soldiers who cast lots for His clothing (Matt. 27:35).

- b) The ones that were distinct from each other:
 - i) Two thieves, one who repented and one who died a blasphemer (Lk. 23:39-40).
 - ii) Two basic reasons for his crucifixion:
 1. For apparent blasphemy - He made Himself the Son of God (Jn. 19:7).
 2. For political expediency - He was King of the Jews (Matt. 27:11).
 - iii) Two men associated with His burial: Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (Jn. 19:38-39).
 - iv) Two groups who had an interest in His crucifixion but for two different reasons:
 1. For the chief priests etc., it was an interest out of hatred (Jn. 15:25)
 2. The women who had an interest because of love.

- c) Consider this situation in another way:
 - i) Looking again at the cross of our Lord Jesus it is observed that there were a number of different groups or individuals around the cross:
 1. We are informed that there were soldiers (Jn. 19:23, 24, 32, 34); thieves (Mk. 15:27); the passers by (Matt. 27:39); the chief priests (Mk. 15:31) and the centurion (Matt. 27:54).
 2. John was there with the mother of our Lord (Jn. 19:25-27). Each of these individuals or groups represent many of humanity in one way or another. Everyone will fall into one of these different groups.

Those Who Were Not There

It is interesting to observe those who were not there. Since the Bible tells us who was there, but by its omissions we understand the following were not there: Pontius Pilate, Herod the king and Judas Iscariot.

1) Pontius Pilate:

- a) He had done his very best to release our Lord but in the end his decision rested on several matters:
 - i) If he released Christ the news would soon get back to Rome that he had released a man who claimed to be a king and that would not bode well for him. It would have been an act of treason and he would have been crucified. Despite his better judgement and conscience, he

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tried to evade the decision and pass the blame for the death of the Lord to others. He could always suppress his conscience by saying, "The Jews crucified Him, I didn't". How many seek to wash their hands of the Lord saying I was not there and I would not have crucified Him, but they fail to realize that by their rejecting His salvation they are saying, "away with him crucify Him", I (we) will not let this man reign over me".

- ii) He could have argued that he did everything he could to release him, but instead relinquished his conscience to what the religious hierarchy forced the people to cry, "Crucify Him, crucify Him" (Lk. 23:21). What self deception if he told himself that. He knew well the Jewish situation. He knew the chief priests were enforcing their will and while he three times said, "I find no fault in him" (Lk. 23:4; Jn. 19:4, 6), yet he gave the Lord over to them to be crucified. He sought to appeal to their sympathies for they brought the Lord out to the common room after He had been lashed, buffeted and crowned (Lk. 23:1-7), but that did not arouse any sympathetic feelings.
- iii) John informs us more of Pilate's judgment of the Lord than any other gospel. Pilate questioned and requestioned the Lord. He was the only one of whom it is recorded that asked the question, "What is truth?" (Jn. 18:38). Whither the Lord answered him or not we do not know but by his wavering, Pilate had in heart rejected the truth and it would seem there was no further word from the Lord for him. Pilate had no backbone to stand for truth and interestingly, He rejected God's voice through his wife to him, even as he sat on the judgment seat (Matt. 27:19).

2) Herod the king:

- a) He had no interest in Christ, the reason being, because God had no word for him.
 - i) God's last voice to him was through John Baptist but because he didn't like the truth (Matt. 14:3-11), he had John put in prison. Then on his birthday, the daughter of Herodias danced before he and his nobles and in his enflamed excitement he made a foolish oath saying, "Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee" (Mk. 6:22). Under her mother's tutelage, she asked for the head of John the Baptist in a basket. That Herod then did. He silenced the voice of God and now the Lord was nothing other than a mere curiosity (Lk. 23:8). Sadly our Lord was nothing other than someone to be humiliated (Lk. 23:11).

2) Judas Iscariot: He was a pathetic individual.

- a) In the upper room the Lord offered Judas the sop (Jn. 13:26-30). It was an act of sincere friendship but Judas took the gift of God and rejected the giver. Despite giving the appearance of being a genuine disciple, Judas was a thief. It was not that this was the first time he had stolen money, perhaps he rationalized it as "pay" (Jn. 12:6). I am sure Judas never thought when he stole the first little thing it would have developed into the love of money and such a dreadful deed. Judas never got any pleasure from the money and after casting it down in the temple, he went and committed suicide (Matt. 27:5). It would seem to be he died before the Lord was crucified for he "went and hanged himself", and the Lord was not crucified for several hours later (Matt. 27:5).

Those Who Were There

1) The soldiers:

- a) For those hardened men this is simply a job to be done with little or no sympathetic feeling for the individuals who were suffering, knowing that death was hours away. Perhaps this was a means to get out of the rigorous training of military warfare, to have a bit of relaxation, to play some games and have a couple of drinks. The sufferings of the Lord meant nothing to them. The fact that the men on the crosses would suffer a dreadful painful death was of no consequence.

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2) The thieves:

- a) In the two thieves we see the marvels of the grace of God. Men who have been the tools of Satan for much of their lives, now they were about to die and what use were they to Satan now? No use! But, the mercy and grace of God was still holding out the opportunity for salvation and one seeing the blessing being still offered, grasped the gift of eternal life. To me it is obvious that at least one of these men had heard the Lord because he believed in the truth of the Lord's resurrection when he said, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom" (Lk. 23:42).
- b) Whither it was fear of the eternal consequences of his sin that made him accept salvation, we do not know. I am sure the vast majority of saints have accepted Christ because of the fear of the hell that awaited them. Furthermore, I suspect it was the repentant thief that had a fear of God for he said, "Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?" (Lk. 23:40). Paraphrasing he said, "Does not thou fear God knowing that in very short time you will be dead and going out to face God, do you have no fear?" Tragically we never read of the other thief accepting the offer of salvation, and from all appearances he died in his sins.

3) The chief priests and scribes and elders: (Matt. 27:41)

- a) What a display of open hypocrisy. They were the religious leaders of the nation whose role it was to uphold the law, yet such was their deliberate blindness and rejection, with frozen hatred they stood at the cross mocking the Lord. How cold and unfeeling is the human heart when away from the fellowship of the Lord. They were getting that which they had so much wanted. Now it was being done and there was no sorrow for His sufferings, no pity for the grieving heart of His mother only smug contempt and contentment that they had got rid of Him.

4) The passers by:

- a) Why they were passing that grisly scene is more than I know. Possibly some were en route to work, but others were sadists, there to see the crucifixion and tormented bodies of men fighting for life. I once had a dog, what would anyone have thought had they seen me en route to have it put down, taunting it and being cruel? They would have thought, "What a despicable human being". Yet, this is what was happening to the Lord. The passers by mocked Him, and twisting His words made light of the truths He spoke.

What was the Lord's response?

As we stand near that old rugged cross we hear the most amazing words, He prays to His Father, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk. 23:34). Did they not know what they were doing? Yes and no. They knew they were crucifying a man but they did not know the one they were crucifying was their Messiah, the Son of God. Despite their callousness and cruelty, He prays for them. In other words, "Father do not judge them yet, give them opportunity to know and understand the gravity of that which they are doing, spare them a little longer, I will bear the punishment for them, forgive them".

..... Rowan Jennings