

Division at the Cross

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[0 : 00] Let us turn again to this chapter we read in Mark's Gospel, Mark chapter 15. And we'll read at verse 39.

And when the centurion who stood facing him saw that in this way he breathed, his last he said, truly, this man was the Son of God.

Now as we know, people's reaction to different circumstances vary according to a person's character, a person's disposition.

The same thing can provoke a totally different reaction in different people. For instance, something as simple as a beautiful sunset.

If you were to be walking along, and as we know here in the West certainly get beautiful sunsets, maybe you were to see the sun in its fullness sinking, and a magnificent sky, and maybe the red being brought onto the sea.

[1 : 20] You might yourself stand in awe. You might be just completely captivated by it. Somebody else may walk by barely noticing, not noticing at all.

And even if their attention is brought to it, it doesn't mean anything to them. There might be others who are so inspired by it that if they're given to song or to poetry or to painting, they're liable to be moved to such a thing.

I suppose it's the same with music. For one person, a piece of music might be something which brings and inspires them and brings them into rapture. And for others, that same piece, they might be covering their ears, thinking it's awful.

And that's how we find life, that the same experience can provoke such different reactions in different people.

And it is certainly true of the cross of Christ. The cross of Jesus Christ provokes different reactions in different people.

[2 : 25] There is no question whatever. And in fact, Jesus himself said that he divides. That he himself will divide even into homes and into families.

That there is a division in the cross. And we find here in the very chapter that we've been reading here, that the cross has been dividing to the right and to the left.

And we see around the cross and even on the cross, we find division being made. Some are for Christ.

Some are against Christ. There's no in between. Either a person is for or against. A person can change. A person can be against Christ.

And wonderfully can be brought to be for Christ. And that itself happened on the cross. Because as we know, if we were to read all the gospel accounts, we find that one of the thieves, one of the men who was being crucified on the cross, at one stage, both of them, one on either side, both of them were reviling Jesus.

[3 : 35] But one of them stopped. Because his eyes were opened to see that the person in the center was indeed the Son of God. And he rebuked the other thief.

And he himself called for mercy. And asked that the Lord would remember him. And remember how Jesus said, Today you will be with me in paradise. So that even on the cross a division is taking place.

One for Christ, one against Christ. If you looked underneath the cross, there was a division. There was a group there that were for Christ. There were others who were so opposed to Christ.

And you know, that's how it is in life. And I'm sure as we go through life, we're so aware and acutely aware of that. Amongst even within our own circle, within our own neighborhoods, within our social circles, that there are those who are for Christ and those who are against Christ.

But my dear friend, if you tonight are for Christ, and you know those who are against Christ, you pray for them. Pray for them.

[4 : 47] Jesus, we'll see that in a moment, Jesus prayed even for those who are putting him to death. Don't you think that if there is somebody tonight who is against Christ, that you should say, Oh, well, I'm not going to have anything to do.

I'm not going to pray for that person. You make sure you pray for him or pray for her. And who knows in God's mercy what he may do. That God is the one who is mighty, the one who is abundant in mercy.

And I'm sure many of us here tonight are here. I know that God is sovereign and God works things according to his own will and his own purpose.

But from one perspective, I'm sure many of us are here tonight because of the prayer of others. I'm sure there are not, if we, if only we knew the prayers.

I'm sure I would almost go as far. I know that we cannot say categorically these things. But I'm sure that everybody in here has been prayed for.

[5 : 55] I would be very surprised if they haven't. And it's a wonderful thing to be prayed for. And there is many a person who has come to faith in Jesus Christ, who has been the product, who's been a child of many prayers, and maybe for years went away in another direction, into a far country, and yet in time was turned round.

So never give up. Never give up with our prayers. But as we're seeing here, the cross divides. For some people, the cross is an offense. We're told that.

The cross of Jesus Christ, for some people, it's an offense. People are offended by it. They find it an offense. People take umbrage. They don't like what they're hearing.

It's still true to this day. There are people offended by being told that they are sinners and that they need Jesus Christ as Savior, that there is no other name under heaven given amongst men whereby we must be saved.

And there are people who will take offense at that. For others, we're told in the Bible that the cross is foolishness. And people will bring their own intellect and their own intelligence, their own mind to bear, and they will look at it and they'll say, this is absurd.

[7 : 15] Do you mean to tell me that this person dying 2,000 years ago is what it's all about? You mean to say that I do not have within my own makeup that which can make myself right with God?

And so they look at the cross and they dismiss it because they think it is foolishness. And I'm sure there's a wide variety of reactions. But if you're in here tonight and you know Jesus as your Savior, you delight in the cross.

It's like the Apostle Paul said, I glory in the cross of Jesus Christ. And maybe there are others in here tonight who do not know Jesus Christ as Savior, and yet you also believe in this cross.

And when we say we believe in the cross, obviously you don't believe in the actual wood of the cross. You believe in what the cross, what took place on the cross, where Jesus Christ is there as a sacrifice for sinners.

You believe implicitly that this is the way of salvation. And may I say, my friend, that is a great state to be. But it isn't enough. It's not enough just to know.

[8 : 30] You've got to do something with what you know. You've got to seek this Lord. You've got to seek this Savior. You've got to seek that the work that Jesus performed on the cross may indeed be the work that is made over to you.

Because this is why he came. This is why he died. In order that you may have life. Thank the Lord tonight that you are here under the gospel.

That you know the salvation. That if somebody came to you on the street tonight and said, what must I do to be saved? You would be able to say to them, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.

Because you know that's what the Bible says. And you believe it's true. But you haven't yourself yet come to believe that savingly.

Will you seek tonight that that might be true in your experience, that you will come to know this Savior personally. But tonight, I want us just to focus for a few moments upon this great declaration made by the Roman soldier at the foot of the cross.

[9 : 53] And we read there that, and when the centurion who stood facing him saw in this way, that in this way he breathed his last. This is talking about the final, the final moment of Christ's life.

When he breathed his last. And it's an incredibly solemn and a very powerful moment when somebody breathes their last.

If you've been with somebody at that point of death, at that moment when our last breath is taken, when you've been in the presence of death, it is something you don't forget.

It is something powerful. Just as a birth is powerful, a death is powerful. And it's one of these great and awesome moments.

And so we have here this moment when Jesus breathed his last. Now as you remember, for six hours prior to this, Jesus had hung on the cross.

[11 : 05] The moment had come that the Jews had longed for. This moment when he would breathe his last. And he took six hours to die because they wanted him crucified.

They were praying for his blood. Not just that he would be executed by a hanging. Not just that he would be executed by being beheaded. Crucify him was a crime.

Because this was the most painful, the most lingering death that was devised. As it has been said, those who were crucified died a thousand deaths.

But there would still come a time when he would breathe his last. But this is what they were wanting. That he would die. It was like he was dying over and over and over again.

The hatred of him was so extreme. But of course the time had actually come now when he came to breathe his last. And into the silence that would have followed.

[12 : 09] Because we read that when Jesus came to breathe his last. Verse 37 tells us that it, we'll see that his breathing of the last wasn't the way that a person would normally breathe his last.

Because verse 37 says, And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. This was a cry of triumph. So that there was this loud cry.

And then he breathed his last. It's quite extraordinary. This wasn't the cry. This wasn't just the, as it were, the petering out of life.

Although there was that in it. It wasn't the petering out of defeat. It was first before he breathed his last. There was a cry of victory.

And then he breathed his last. And into the silence that would have been round the cross at that moment, a voice cries out.

[13 : 18] And that voice which said, Truly this man was the Son of God. This statement didn't come from John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, who was at the cross with Mary.

This statement didn't come from the women who were huddled there together. This statement came from the man who was in charge of the Roman soldiers.

This man was an officer. He was a centurion. He was an officer in the Roman army. And there's no doubt that he would have been the man who would have been the officer in charge of the execution.

He would have been the one who would have been overseeing the putting to death of the Lord Jesus Christ. And he would have been involved in many executions because that was their way of life.

Death, in fact, was a way of life for many of these Roman soldiers. And it's an extraordinary thing because we find that as Jesus was being put to death and they crucified him, that is, the soldiers who crucified him, divided his garments among them, casting lots for them to decide what it should take.

[14 : 34] So you can see how incredible it is how easily human beings become desensitized. Here is somebody, here are people in agony, in the agonies of death, dying the most horrific way.

And yet, they're, as it were, gambling below the cross. They're trying to work out, by lot, who's going to have what, completely oblivious to what is taking place above them.

And so you see how quickly human nature can go from how God had intended it to be into this fearful mess of, as we say, where people become desensitized to human life and to human suffering.

And for many of these Roman soldiers, putting someone to death was no more than what we would do when we're putting out a light. If you just go and switch off a light, you don't think anything of that.

It's just what you do. You don't switch off the light and say, oh, light went out and you begin to think about it and go into profound thoughts. You just switch it off. And for many of them, that's just the way it was.

[15 : 45] It was a way of life. It's horrific, but that's the way it had become. Now this centurion had seen the reaction to the being crowd.

This centurion had seen the way the crowd had treated Jesus. He had seen the way they mocked him and they had hit him and they had reviled him and ridiculed him where they were claiming, ridiculed him because he had been claiming to be the son of God.

And I'm sure the centurion would say to himself, well, if somebody was the son of God, he wouldn't be treated like that. But anyway, when I look at the centurion, I think he was a man who was given to reflection.

And that's a good thing because we find that he doesn't seem to be influenced in any way by what is going on around him, by the crowd. This centurion, we see, was standing, verse 39, and when the centurion who stood facing him.

So you see that there were all kinds of different reactions going on around the cross. There were the other soldiers who weren't giving a thought to what was happening on the cross.

[17 : 06] They were too busy working out who was going to get what. There was another crowd and they were passing by and they were mocking Christ and they were reviling Christ and they were pouring their scorn upon him.

And there were others huddled together who were sympathizers with Jesus. The centurion isn't with any of these groups. He's standing on his own and he's facing Jesus.

Now I suppose in one respect, he had to do that because he was the officer in charge. It was his duty to see that everything was done properly.

But I also think he was there because he was somebody who was reflecting upon what was taking place. So that this centurion, we're told, stood facing him.

He was watching all that took place. He was listening to everything that was said. And I believe that over these hours that what he saw and what he heard began to work powerfully in his life.

[18 : 20] This man, as he stood facing Christ, watching there, heard Christ speak seven times from the cross. And this man was confronted by something that he had probably never, well, it is, he was confronted by something he had never seen before.

As a centurion, as we say, he was somebody who would be used to this, used to executions. He'd seen it all, the different reactions. Some people would be pleading.

Some people would be filled with fear. For some people there would be a resignation. Some people there would be anger. There would be all kinds of different reactions as people who had been taken to be put to death.

But he saw something different that day. It wasn't just the resignation of Jesus, but it was the prayer of Jesus for him and for the soldiers involved.

Here was a man, they were put into death and he was praying with a reality and with an authority and he was saying, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.

[19 : 36] And I believe that that prayer was being answered here in this very before this centurion leaves the scene of the cross that this very prayer that Jesus had offered was answered.

And so he was seeing something unusual. He would also have been listening to the conversation between Jesus and the other criminal being executed.

He would have heard that man saying, Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And he would have heard Jesus say to him, today you will be with me in paradise.

Christ. And then alongside all these things there were other things. For instance, the darkness. We read about that verse 33. And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth.

So that for three hours round the cross, round that area there, it was plunged into darkness. When the sun at midday, Christ was executed in the morning, was put on the cross in the morning.

[20 : 48] At midday, this phenomenon occurred. Where the whole area was plunged into darkness. It wasn't just like a total, it would have been even darker than this eclipse, like an eclipse, but even darker.

And of course that was a, it was symbolic of a greater darkness. It was symbolic of that darkness that Jesus was experiencing. This was the dark moment of the world.

They talk of the dark ages. Well, this was the dark age where the Son of God was experiencing what constitutes hell in his own soul, as there was the withdrawal of all the Father's love and grace and mercy.

And there was a pouring out upon his soul of God's wrath and anger for sin. And in that moment of the darkness that was appearing in the outer sphere, Christ was experiencing that in the inner. And so, there were all these things taking place. And then, there was that unusual experience as Jesus breathed his last.

[22 : 08] That cry of triumph. because Jesus was in control even to the last. He dismissed his own spirit.

He said, into thy hands I commit my spirit. And he, the idea is that he breathed out, he committed as it were, he dismissed his spirit to God.

He was in control even in death. It wasn't, as we said, the last gasp of a broken, defeated man. but the victorious gasp, following on from the victorious cry of one who had won and achieved what he set out to do.

And the centurion who had stood for these hours facing Christ and having watched and taken note of and heard came to this conclusion conclusion.

And he cries out to truly this man was the son of God. Now some people have said when he said that, that he was being sarcastic, that he was being cynical.

[23 : 21] Not at all. Because in fact if we go to Luke's gospel it tells us that he praised God when he spoke. And he said truly that Jesus truly was a righteous man.

man. So you see this man is convinced of the reality of Christ. And what a wonderful incident this is. And what an encouragement. Because it shows us that this is a way of salvation. This is a way. As this commander of the Roman army was watching and listening, he comes to make a confession that Jesus Christ is Lord.

And this conviction came about by seeing and by hearing. Faith comes by hearing. And we have these words of Christ from the cross recorded for us.

And down through the history of the church many people have come to faith through the preaching and through the reading of these particular words.

[24 : 36] These would be termed the seven sayings of the cross. Well, I believe that one of those who was converted of course was actually on the cross and was part of the sayings.

But I also believe that below the cross this man also came to faith because he saw, he heard, and he believed.

And that's how it is to this day that we are able to see that this is Jesus. That we hear what his word is saying. And tonight we have the same opportunity because we are here around this word, around this word of Jesus.

And what are you going to do with this word tonight? because this centurion didn't just believe in his heart. He made that confession with his mouth, which is important.

You know, there are some people who think, oh, well, I can believe in my heart and leave it at that. No, you can't. We're told in the Bible quite clearly about salvation, that is, the salvation involves believing in our heart and confessing with our mouth.

[25 : 57] And I always think that's one of the great things that we have. With regard, I know that people find it an ordeal coming to a concession prior to a communion, but it's a great thing.

Because one of the things that a person is doing is what the Bible asks that they do, is making this confession that Christ is their Lord, that Christ is Lord.

And that's what happens. well, here is this heathen soldier, and after performing the most awful deed that this world has ever seen, comes to believe that the one that he was in control over in crucifying is indeed the Son of God.

And you know, it's just a thought, but we read in the last little part there that, you know, when they came to ask for the body of Jesus, Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died.

And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph.

[27 : 17] Pure speculation, but I wonder if the centurion said anything other than, yes, he is dead. Because Pilate himself had so many problems in handing over Jesus.

Pilate was so convinced that this was a good man. I wonder if the centurion said to Pilate as well, do you know, that truly was the Son of God.

I would love to think that he even made his testimony in front of the Roman governor. I don't know. That is pure speculation.

But you see this, the impact, you see the effect. And tonight, my dear friends, we have to ask ourselves this question. What is the impact of Christ's death upon your life? Is it just a story? Is it just something that you're familiar with? Or is it a reality that is affecting your life for time and for eternity?

[28 : 28] It's a powerful issue. As we said, the cross of Christ divides. On which side of that division do you fall tonight?

Are you with Christ? Are you in Christ? Christ? Or are you still out of Christ? Please, please, make Christ your Savior.

Let us pray. Lord our God, we pray tonight that as we have reflected upon this man who witnessed, who was in charge of what took place in the death of Jesus, that his, the testimony that he made may indeed be a testimony that speaks into our own heart.

Truly, this was the Son of God, this is the Son of God. Help us, Lord, to remember that Jesus is Lord. May he be our Lord tonight.

May we know his salvation. May we know the freedom, the liberty that comes in having Christ as Savior. Bless us tonight, we pray.

[29 : 45] Part us with thy blessing. Do us good and take away from us all our sin. In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen.