

CHALLENGE OF THE CROSS

How often have you heard the protest, "That's not fair!" coming from someone who has been wronged? So many things in life are NOT fair. If things were fair, then we would have no need for laws or law enforcement. If things were really fair, then there would be no crime. If things were fair, then we would live in a perfect world. In reality, we live in a "fallen" world – a world that is under the influence of greed and self interest. The best (or worst) demonstration of such unfairness is captured in the arrest, trial, and sentencing of Jesus. Nevertheless, God used this event and those events that followed as the primary instrument to bring about the beginning of the end of unfairness and to usher in a new era where love and grace replace hate and greed. We ourselves must follow that example and turn every incident of unfairness into an occasion to destroy unfairness. This response to what we face in life is one of the challenges of the cross.

The Jewish leaders feared that the teachings of Jesus would destroy their system of "law and order." They had a law for everything and thought that a system operating strictly on the basis of love would cause the demise of civilization as they knew it. They were willing to do anything to protect their system. In fact, they even went so far as to break their own laws trying to preserve a system that depended on keeping the law for its workability. They, in effect, proved that the law has no power to cause you to obey it. (This may be the basis of the argument that you can not legislate morality.) Admittedly, it (the law) can impose penalty and point out the breaching of the law; however, other motivation must exist for keeping the law. Unselfish love is the ONLY reason that will consistently work to provide motivation for keeping the law. The Jewish leaders had a trial before the Sanhedren using false witnesses regarding what Jesus was teaching. This plan failed because the "liars" could not keep their story straight. The Council finally came to the point of declaring Jesus guilty of claiming to be the Son of God. They sentenced Him to death not because of what He had done but because of Who He is!

Because of the political situation they were without authority to carry out the penalty and, therefore, were forced into further lying to follow through on their plans to eliminate Jesus. They took Jesus to Pilate the Roman governor. According to Luke, they accused Him of perverting the nation, of forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, and of saying that He was the Messiah. None of this got Pilate's attention. He did not know what a Messiah was. The Jewish leaders explained that it was like a king. Now that got Pilate's attention.

Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. Then Pilate asked him, "Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?" But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge--to the great amazement of the governor. Matthew 27:11-14

Pilate could not believe what he was seeing. Jesus did not look like a king. He asked sarcastically, "You are the King of the Jews?" Jesus gave a very calm reply: He said, "Those are your own words." The Jewish leaders could tell from Pilate's response that this was not getting them anywhere, so they started hurling accusations against Jesus. Jesus did not answer back and this impressed Pilate. Paul tells us that Jesus made a good confession before Pontius Pilate. A simple answer is sometimes best and some things do not deserve a reply.

Now it was the governors custom at the Feast to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed. "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor. "Barabbas," they answered. "What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?" Pilate asked. They all

answered, "Crucify him!" Matthew 27:15-17,20-22

Pilate came to the conclusion that Jesus had done nothing worthy of death. He wanted to let Jesus go. He had even sent Jesus to Herod and Herod could not find anything wrong. At the Passover season, a prisoner was released as a favor to the Jews. Pilate wanted to let Jesus go, but the Jews protested. They preferred that Pilate release the most dangerous criminal in prison than to see Jesus go free. Pilate taunted them with that choice:

Barabbas or Jesus who is called Christ?

Barabbas (Bar Abbas) literally means "son of daddy." That was the man's last name. His given name was Joshua, which in the New Testament is rendered "Jesus." This man's name literally meant "Jesus, son of earthly father." The people were being asked to choose between him and Jesus, Son of Heavenly Father. We are told that Barabbas was a robber, we know that Jesus was righteous. They were choosing between Jesus, the robber and Jesus, the righteous. The choice between the earthly and the heavenly is made many times during each day. We are faced with this decision to take the high road or the low road. The choice of taking the low road and following the way of the world is a decision to crucify Jesus. This is what the Jews did.

When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. Matthew 27:35

Many cruel things were done to Jesus prior to His being put on the cross. The Romans ridiculed Him and nearly beat Him to death before nailing His hands and feet to the cross. Materialism was a problem for people even in that day. The soldiers cared nothing for the Jews who were being crucified that day, they had interest in who would wind up with Jesus' clothes. Some fifteen hundred years earlier, David had written the words "They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots." Those words were fulfilled that day at Calvary.

From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"--which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah." Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him." And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. Matthew 27:45-50

One of the more amazing things about this suffering of Jesus was that He had the power to stop it at any time. Nevertheless, He refrained from doing so even in the face of people challenging Him to come down from the cross. Even nature recoiled at what was happening to Jesus: darkness was over the face of the earth and there was an earthquake. Jesus, on the cross, became SIN for us. As such, He sensed that God the Father had turned away from Him and He cried out in the anguish of body, soul, and spirit. His enemies had no compassion and mocked Him even more. We are told He said, "I thirst" and that did not bring water but vinegar. Some commentaries have suggested that this was the only act of kindness done for Jesus on the cross. Psalm 69: 20-21 denies that this act was an act of kindness.

His final words from the cross were, "Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit." These words are the confession that God wants to hear from each of us as we surrender our very being to Him. We must come to the point of completely surrendering everything (body, soul, and spirit) to God and trusting Him with it. If we fail to do this, then Jesus' death on the cross will not have had any benefit for us. We must identify with Him in His death that redeemed us from sin. We must also follow His example in taking up our cross so that we can continually put self to death.