

The Happening of the Cross

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INTRODUCTION

Jesus said more about his death and Resurrection than is often realized. There are many direct references, and many other passages have a fuller meaning in the light of the Cross. The proportion of the Gospels given to the Cross also indicates the central importance of the atonement.

This little booklet is intended as a help for those who are wanting to examine the happening of the Cross as the Scriptures record it. Included is a brief overview of the event, a reference table for comparing the Gospel accounts, and some questions for further reflection.

Some ambiguity exists in the Gospel record concerning the timing of the various events. I have tried to follow the simplest path, realizing that others place the events differently. The diversity between the writers tells of the greatness of the happening of the Cross and of their own integrity in recording the details. Also, they did not have digital watches and portable video recorders!

It may be useful to cut up a couple of tattered New Testaments and paste the Gospel account, alongside each other using the reference table.

Finally, let me encourage a focus not merely on the historical details, but on the people involved—their hopes, emotions and faith—and especially on the humanity of the Divine Son who ‘loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God’. As he said, ‘Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father’.

*Don Priest
Point Pass
March 1985*

THE HAPPENING OF THE CROSS

The two disciples going to Emmaus were busy reflecting on Jesus' death. As they tried to grasp its meaning, 'Jesus himself came up and walked along with them'. Like them, we need him to open the Scriptures to us so that we can believe what the prophets have written concerning him having 'to suffer these things and then enter his glory'.

The Gospels make it plain that the Cross was no unexpected surprise to Jesus. It was indicated at his birth, baptism and transfiguration. He spoke of the sign of Jonah, of how he must be killed and on the third day raised to life. He taught that the Son of Man had come to offer his life as a ransom for many. He also talked of laying down his life as the Good Shepherd and of his being 'lifted up'.

Prior to Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, John records the raising of Lazarus and the High Priest's prophecy 'that it is better that one man die for the people than that the whole nation should perish'. After this, Jesus cleansed the temple, dialogued with the Jewish leaders and talked at length about the end times. John mentions his discussion with the Greeks and the Father's strong voice from heaven.

While this was going on, the plot to crucify him gathered momentum. The anointing of Jesus at Simon's house was the last straw for Judas, who arranged with the chief priests to betray Jesus. Yet, as Jesus pointed out, the aroma of that anointing goes wherever the Gospel is preached, Mary seems to be one person who accurately sensed what was happening to the Messiah.

The account of the Passover meal tells of cautious preparation, of Jesus washing the disciples' feet (including Peter's), of Judas' exposure to the others, of the dispute about who would be greatest, as well as the feast itself.

Included in this are Jesus' tender words with Peter, telling him that 'Satan has asked to sift you as wheat' and how Jesus had prayed that his 'faith may not fail'. The warning to Peter was extended to the others as Jesus told them they would all be scattered when the Shepherd was smitten.

John records Jesus' words of comfort to his disciples. The theme of these words is centred in the necessity of the Cross to the Father's will. He told them he must go to the Father in order that the Holy Spirit could comfort them and lead them from within. They also heard of their coming joy and of the defeat of the world-system.

This was no academic issue. When they arrived at Gethsemane and the disciples slept rather than prayed, Jesus sought his Father's strength. His awareness of the coming Cross overwhelmed him with sorrow. He was at the point of immediate death when the angel strengthened him to fulfil his Father's will that no one take his life from him. He had explained, 'I lay down my life of my own accord. I have authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father'. At this time Jesus prayed to his Father that eternal life be secured for those given him because He loved him 'before the foundation of the world'.

The disciples' time in the garden with their Master was suddenly interrupted by the small army accompanying Judas, who betrayed Jesus with a kiss. Peter's effort at slicing off the High Priest's ear led Jesus to mention the ample number of angels he could call upon! However, fulfilling God's purposes took priority. Mark adds a little aside concerning the

young man who had to flee naked to avoid being caught up in this arrest. He was not the only one to leave Jesus to the temple guard.

Amid physical and verbal abuse, Jesus gently reminded them of how he had taught openly in the Temple. He told them that they could have arrested him there and that those who heard him knew what he taught. Otherwise he remained silent until asked to confess whether he was the Messiah. Meanwhile Peter found the pressure too intense for his camouflage and left very distressed. Judas was filled with remorse for 'betraying innocent blood' and, after returning his reward, hanged himself.

After facing Pilate and Herod (who decided to cease their mutual animosity), Jesus was offered to the assembled crowd as an alternative to the release of Barabbas. Although wanting to release Jesus, Pilate capitulated and handed him over for flogging and crucifixion. The customary release of a prisoner at the Passover Feast had provided the situation for Jesus' civic trial. Not even the dream that Pilate's wife had endured could encourage Pilate to follow his conscience.

While the women who lamented this outcome were warned of coming disaster, Simon from Cyrene found himself forced to carry Jesus' cross. How was he affected by Jesus' comment that 'if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?'. Are his sons mentioned here because the family became known to the early church?

Golgotha means the place of the skull. It was there that the two criminals were crucified with one each side of the King of the Jews. Jesus refused the offered sedative, preferring to face his suffering fully conscious of what was happening.

It was usual for a sign describing the crime to be displayed. But the chief priests were annoyed by the notice Jesus was given and asked Pilate to alter it. Pilate's insistence that it read, 'Jesus of Nazareth,

the King of the Jews', must have reflected something of how he felt. We are told that many read the sign, which was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. The event must have left its mark on the many pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover.

The four soldiers who crucified Jesus took his clothes and, dividing them into shares, decided to cast lots to work out who would receive the seamless, fully woven undergarment. Both this and Jesus' refusal to take sedation are seen by the Gospel writers as the fulfilling of prophecies.

The warm response evoked by his entry into Jerusalem was in stark contrast to the provocative abuse and derision hurled at him there. The passers-by, the religious leaders, the soldiers and the robbers all joined in the deluge of insults. Their challenge that he save himself by coming down from the Cross was not very different from the temptation that he jump off the Temple pinnacle.

The abuse was broken by some significant interactions. Firstly, Jesus reveals his deep desire that his Father forgive them for acting so ignorantly. Shortly after this, one thief challenges the other; 'Don't you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly . . . but this man has done nothing wrong'. This repentant thief had only a short wait before he was living in Paradise with the King who knew his suffering so well.

Another intimate moment was shared as Jesus told his mother and John to regard themselves as mother and son.

What followed must have been awesome. Luke, that careful historian and doctor, tells of three hours of darkness, during which the sun stopped shining. Although no physical explanation is obvious (since there can be no eclipse at a full moon:

Well might the sun in darkness hide,
And shut his glories in,
When Christ the mighty Maker died
For man, the creature's sin.

However horrific the torment of physical pain, the agony that loving obedience and holy desire knew during those hours is evident in the loud cries that followed. By this stage the derisive din would have died down and those cries must have pierced the atmosphere, summoning the attention of those who remained. There was no insane squeal, but the assertive words of one who experienced the deepest moral and social suffering possible for a human.

After Jesus called out to God using the first words of Psalm 22, some of those nearby presumed he was calling Elijah, and wondered if Elijah would come and save him. John records that Jesus said 'I am thirsty'. The wine vinegar in the sponge on the end of the stalk of hyssop that he then drank helped him declare two final statements 'with a loud voice':

'It is finished'
and

'Father, into Thy hands I commit my spirit.'

Those four final utterances, John tells us, were said because he knew that 'all was now completed'. He breathed his last, aware of what had transpired and in intimate spiritual fellowship with his Father. His final acts of bowing his head and giving up his spirit were acts of accomplishment and not defeated resignation.

The impact of these final words must have been considerable. The centurion praised God and acknowledged the righteousness of this human Son of God. The crowds beat their breasts as they left, whilst his friends, including the women who cared for him, watched 'at a distance'. We are also told of the Temple curtain tearing from top to bottom, of an earthquake and of some Resurrections.

To enable the bodies to be removed from the crosses before the Sabbath began that evening, the soldiers came to break the legs of those crucified. John tells the testimony of someone who saw that Jesus was verified as being already dead. The flow of water and blood from the piercing of the spear removed the need to break any of his bones. It was exactly, John reminds us, as prophesied in the Scriptures.

Joseph of Arimathea, assisted by Nicodemus, gained permission from Pilate to put Jesus' body in his tomb with the dignity of Jewish burial customs. The women, after seeing this, went away to prepare spices and perfumes for the body.

The next day the Pharisees convinced Pilate to place guards at the tomb but little did these soldiers expect the events that followed. Matthew reports that it was common knowledge that these men were bribed to remain silent concerning that first Easter Day.

The events of that day, when the women and the disciples saw the risen Lord, were not matters to be silent about. Rather, as Cleopas and his friends learnt as they walked to Emmaus later that day, the Resurrection is essential to the happening of the Cross.

Just as the angel told them at the empty tomb, so Jesus 'opened their minds to understand the Scriptures' concerning his death and Resurrection. Let us not be 'foolish . . . and slow of heart', but let us, 'clothed with power' from the glorified Son, be his 'witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth'.

As Jesus promised before his death, his Father's promise of forgiven sins, of the outpoured Holy Spirit and of the present action of the Kingdom are our testimony to the happening of the Cross today (and to the end of history). To have this testimony is 'to know Jesus Christ and him crucified' and to take up our cross and follow him.

A TABLE FOR COMPARING REFERENCES

Event	Mark	Matthew	Luke	John
Lazarus				11:1-44
Caiaphas				11:45-57,18
Triumphal Entry	11:1-11	21 : 1-11	19:28-44	12:12-19
House of Prayer	11:12-19	21:12-17	19:45-48	
Voice from heaven				12:19-50
The end times ++	11:20-13:37	21:18-25:46	20:1-21:38	
The plot thickens	14:1-2	26:1-5	22:1-2	
Anointing	14:3-9	26:6-13		12:1-11
Judas to betray	14:10-11	25:14-16	22:3-6	13: 2
Lord's Supper	14:12-26	26:17-30	22:7-30	13:1-30
Sifted as wheat	14:28-31	26:31-35	22:31-38	13:31-38
The Discourse				14:1-16:33
At Gethsemane	14:32-42	26:36-46	21:39-46	17:1-26
Arrest & Trial	14:43-65	26:47-68	22:47-53	18: 1-27
Judas death		27:1-10		
The cock crow	14:66-72	26:69-75	22:54-62	18:1-2 7
Pilate	15:1-15	27:11-26	22:63-23:25	18:28-19:15
Soldiers mock	15:16-20	27:27-31		
To Golgotha	15 :21-22	27:32-33	23: 26-31	
Crucified King	1 5:23-32	27:34-44	23:32-43	19:16-27
Deep darkness	15:33	27:45	23:44-45	
Victorious Death	15:34-41	27:46-56	23: 46-49	19:28-39
Royal Burial	15:42-47	27:57-61	23:50-56	19:28-37
Tomb guard		27:62-66		
Resurrection	16: 1-11	28 :1-10	24: 1 -12	20:1 -18
Guards' Report		28:11-15		

To Emmaus	16:12-13		24:13-35	
Risen Lord	15:14		24:36-49	20:19-21:25
Ascension	16:15-20	28:16-20	24:50-Acts1:11	
Gall wine	15:23	27:34		
Clothes	15:24	27:35-36	23:34	19:23-24
Sign	15:26	27:37	23:38	19:19-22
Abuse: passers	15:29-30	27:39-40	23:55	
Abuse: elders	15:31-32	27:41-43	23:35	
Abuse: soldiers			23:36-37	
Father forgive			23:34	
Robbers	15:27-28,32	27:38,44	23:39-43	19:18
Dear woman				19:25-27
Darkness	15:33	27:45	23:44-45	
My God, why?	15:34--36	27:46-47		
I thirst				19:28
Sponge		27:48-49		19:29
It is finished				19:30
Into thy hands	(15:37)	(27:50)	23:46	(19:30)
Curtain	15:38	27:51	23:45	
Tombs		27:52-52		
Centurion	15:39	27:54	23:47	
Crowd			23:48	
Women	15:40-41	27:55-56	23:49	
Joseph	15:42-47	27:57-61	2.3:50-56	19:38-42

A SUMMARY

THE PERSON: THE PEOPLE

- The Cross came as no surprise to Jesus.
- 'Lazarus come out!'
- Caiaphas' indignant prophecy.
- The triumphal entry of the righteous king.
- Cleansing of the 'House of Prayer for all nations'.
- The Father's voice: His coming glory.
- Talk of the end-times, and other matters.
- The plot thickens.
- The woman who understands.
- Judas settles for 30 silver coins.
- The Passover Meal: Going home to Father.
Sending the Spirit.
Overcoming the world.
- Gethsemane: Overwhelmed to the point of death.
- Betrayal, arrest and trial. And the young lad.
- Sifted as wheat, scattered as sheep.
- Gentile endorsement. Pilate and Herod.
- Led to Golgotha. Simon from Cyrene.
- The crucified King: The forgiving Father.
The coming Paradise.
Mother and Son.

- Deep darkness. Forsaken, thirsty humanity.
- 'O death, where is your victory?'
- Royal Burial. Joseph and Nicodemus.
- Messengers of Resurrection: Mary Magdalene,
Joanna, Salome,
James' mother
Peter and John.
The guards.
- Emmaus: Burning hearts and broken bread.
- Witnesses of these things.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. How does the raising of Lazarus influence the events that follow?
2. What impact does the large gathering of people in Jerusalem have on the events leading to the Cross?
3. Consider the responses of the leaders and the crowds to Jesus' teaching.
4. What can we learn from the references to Jesus' emotions prior to his Crucifixion? (Note John 11:11–18.)
5. Consider Jesus' death in the light of I Corinthians 15:50–58, Hebrews 5:7–10 and Acts 2:17–36, especially verses 24, 29, 31–33.
6. Trace the references to Nicodemus in John's Gospel. (See John 3:1–19, 7:50, 19:39.)
7. Reflect on the meaning and significance of each of the seven words Jesus said from the Cross.
8. Summarize Jesus' teaching after his Resurrection. How does this relate to his teaching to the disciples immediately prior to his death? (See, for example, Luke 22:14–32 and John 14–16.)
9. Consider the awareness of the women followers of Jesus, of his death and Resurrection.
10. Compare Jesus' calls to be alert in Matthew 24:42, Mark 13:32–37 and Luke 21:34–36 with Matthew 26:40–46, Mark 14:32–42 and Luke 22:39–46.