

## *Three At the Cross*

*Mark 15: 21-22; Luke 23: 39-43; Mark 15: 37-39*

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Let's meet three men who encountered Jesus with his cross. I'd like to tell you their stories, then show you some pictures of them, and then see how closely we can relate to them in these strange and isolating times.

### **Simon of Cyrene**

The Roman governor, Pilate, had Jesus' whipped with 39 lashes. The mocking soldiers jammed a circle of sharp thorns onto his head. They hit him with sticks, spat on him, then led Jesus down the road towards Golgotha, the place of the Skull, where criminals were crucified. Along the way, the soldiers compelled a bystander to carry the cross for Jesus. This meant that Jesus, a strong carpenter, had been so weakened by the beatings that he could not carry the beams. Traditionally, we have imagined that Jesus stumbled under its weight.

The man they conscripted was Simon. He was from Cyrene, a region of northern Africa in today's Libya. Simon had come to Jerusalem to join the crowds for the Passover celebration. He happened to be on this main road as the crucifixion procession passed by. The gospel tells us that Simon was the father of Rufus and Alexander. This is a most encouraging detail. Simon's sons were mentioned in Mark's gospel because his readers would have recognized their names as fellow believers. Something happened to Simon of Cyrene when he carried the cross of Jesus to make him a believer who passed his faith to his sons.



Here you see a photo of a sculpture on the campus of Oakwood College in Huntsville, AL. The artist, Alan Collins, entitled it "A Monument to Service." A historically black school, Oakwood's stated goal is "developing servant leaders." I'd like you to take about half a minute now to list all the things you think are notable about this sculpture. If you're watching with others, you can talk together. [Pause] I'm sure you noticed the clasping of hands, the way one brother warrior helps up another. You saw Simon's rippling arms in holding both the cross and Jesus. You noticed their eyes locked on each other. You saw

that this Simon has characteristics of an African American. We'll return to this picture in a moment.

## **The Good Thief**

The next character appears in Luke's gospel. He is one of two thieves crucified on either side of Jesus. These were chronic, hardened criminals. The first taunted Jesus "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other thief rebuked him. He said to Jesus, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!" Jesus, from his agony, assured him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."



Take a look now at a photo of another sculpture, this one completed in 2012 by Bruno Stasiak. The crucified men are depicted without any social distancing. Take another half minute now and observe, and discuss, what you note in this scene. [Pause] I'm sure you notice that thieves are crucified in a different way, with their arms tied behind their backs. You can feel how exposed and helpless they are. I feel the motion in this scene, as if I can see them heaving, writhing, struggling to breathe. If your screen is big enough, you see the wide, almost desperate eyes of the thief. And you see Jesus, though in agony, turning his full attention to this man. Lord, remember me. Today you will be with me in Paradise. Again, we will return to this scene.

## **Centurion at the Cross**

Guards would be stationed at crucifixions to prevent desperate family members or followers from trying to release their loved ones. The captain of this detachment was a centurion. The Romans crucified thousands. No doubt this centurion had seen many men die agonizing deaths on a cross. Surely many went out cursing the Romans in bitter anger. Many die in abject fear of the next life. Jesus seemed to die differently. The gospels look at this scene from different perspectives. Luke recalled Jesus' last words as "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," as faithful quotation from Psalm 31. And the centurion declared, "Certainly this man was innocent" (Lk. 23: 47). In Mark's gospel, we hear Jesus cry, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" and then with a loud cry, he breathed his last. This prompted the centurion to exclaim, "Surely, this was the Son of God!"



Take a look at this photo from a movie. Once more, take a moment to say what you notice [pause]. You see the darkness that hung over the earth, the eerie sense of night in the middle of the day. You feel the loneliness of the scene. Only Romans are shown. Death is lonely. You see the centurion with sword dropped. His head is lifted up in awe. Jesus did not die like guilty, violent perpetrators. Something, even in his agony, prompted a hardened soldier to confess that crucifixion was the wrong sentence. And though Caesar sat on the empire's throne, Jesus is the Son of God.

Now let's take it deeper as we return to each scene.



Now you are Simon. You are pushed towards a fallen Jesus. You are surprised, even frightened. This was not what you expected. But as you stretch out your hand, Jesus' eyes lock onto yours. He takes your hand. He looks straight at you. What would you say to him? What words come to you as you pull him to his feet. Say those words now [Pause].

1800 years ago, Augustine, a Christian bishop also from North Africa, said, "Christ-God is the country to which we go. Christ-man is the way by which we go. He is in heaven. Yet he is also here. And here, you find him needy in his poor." Would you extend the hand to Christ on the way to his cross? Of course you would! Can you do that now? Yes, you can! We have all been pressed into a different kind of service this week. We're not doing what we planned to be doing. We've been compelled to different activity. There is opportunity to reach out a hand to clasp another and lift them up. Touching the ones you live with. Speaking words of love. Donating your blood, a pint of your very life this week when need is critical. Purchasing food for others and dropping it at Gardere. Pressing into Christ in prayer each morning so your mind doesn't go crazy and you are of some use to others. What you say to Jesus, say to each other. Here, take my hand! I'm with you!



Now you are on a cross next to Jesus. Your life draws to a close and you know at judgment it will be found wanting. But this man hanging next to you seems to be different. Though he is dying, you realize that he is the King. He is not going into the void, but into glory. “Jesus, remember me!” you cry. What are you asking him for? Take a moment to gaze at this picture and answer from your heart. Talk to each other [Pause]

One of the great fears of death was being cut off. Even our loved ones begin to forget us. And more, the ancients feared that death cut them off from God himself, as if we get expunged even from God’s thoughts. When the thief begs Jesus to *remember* him, it is a plea to remain in existence, not to be left to utter darkness, for to be forgotten by God would mean being *cut off* from God’s presence. The thief asks to be remembered. Jesus answers, “You will be with me.” In other words, “You will not be cut off from God’s hand. I will enter the experience of that utter forsakenness so that you will not. You will not end alone. You will be with me.”

Last week, I turned to the psalms to still my anxious, darting mind. The end of Psalm 31 startled me, “When I was in a besieged city, I had said in my alarm, ‘I am cut off from your sight.’” Smack! We’re all in a besieged city. There is an enemy at the gate and we are forced behind the walls of our homes. I’ve been alarmed. I’m cut off from people! From work! From living! And of course the sneaky doubt snakes through me, “What if I am cut off from God? What if he’s not there? What if this loneliness is forever?” Lord, remember me! The psalm goes on, with those wonderful two words, “But you...But you heard my pleas for mercy!” He sends his Spirit. No walls, no locks, no virus can keep him out. When we call, he comes. He gives assurance that we are not cut off. We are with him; we will be with him.

Finally, let’s return to the centurion at the cross. But instead of revisiting the photo, I want to segue. First light-hearted and then heart-stirring.



In fifth grade, one of my best buddies, Brett Peterson, developed juvenile diabetes. This disease is notoriously hard to get stabilized. For a while, he didn’t play outside as much as he used to. So we had an afterschool ritual. Big bowl of popcorn. Diet Dr. Pepper and milk (don’t knock until you’ve tried it!). And a couple hours of sit coms. Including one starring this guy. Ernest Borgnine in *McHale’s Navy*. Ridiculously silly show!



So I was surprised to learn this week, that years later, Borgnine played the centurion at the cross in Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth*. I was even more surprised to read of the profound transforming experience Borgnine had. In his own words,

When it came time for my scene during the crucifixion, the weather was chill and gray. The camera was to be focused on me at the foot of the cross, and so it was not necessary for Robert Powell, the actor who portrayed Jesus, to be there.

Instead, Zeffirelli put a chalk mark on a piece of scenery beside the cameraman. "I want you to look up at that mark," he told me, "as if you were looking at Jesus."

"Okay," I said, moving into position and looking up at the mark as instructed.

Then I hesitated. Somehow I wasn't ready. I was uneasy. "Do you think it would be possible for somebody to read from the Bible the words Jesus said as He hung on the cross?"

I knew the words well from the days of my childhood in an Italian-American family in Connecticut, and I'd read them in preparation for the film. Even so, I wanted to hear them now.

"I will do it myself," Zeffirelli said. He found a Bible, opened it to the book of Luke and signaled for the camera to start rolling.

As Zeffirelli began reading Christ's words aloud, I stared up at that chalk mark, thinking what might have gone through the centurion's mind.

*That poor Man up there, I thought. I met Him when He healed my servant, who is like a son to me. Jesus says He is the Son of God, an unfortunate claim during these perilous times. But I know He is innocent of any crime.*

"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." The voice was Zeffirelli's, but the words burned into me—the words of Jesus.

*Forgive me, Father, for even being here, was the centurion's prayer that formed in my thoughts. I am so ashamed, so ashamed.*

As I stared upward, instead of the chalk mark, I suddenly saw the face of Jesus Christ, lifelike and clear. It was not the features of Robert Powell I was used to seeing, but the most beautiful, gentle visage I have ever known.



Pain-seared, sweat-stained, with blood flowing down from thorns pressed deep, His face was still filled with compassion. He looked down at me through tragic, sorrowful eyes with an expression of love beyond description. Then His cry rose against the desert wind. Not the voice of Zeffirelli, reading from the Bible, but the voice of Jesus Himself: "Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit."

In awe I watched Jesus' head slump to one side. I knew He was dead. A terrible grief welled within me, and completely oblivious to the camera, I started sobbing uncontrollably.

"Cut!" yelled Zeffirelli. Fellow actors Olivia Hussey and Anne Bancroft were crying too. I wiped my eyes and looked up again to where I had seen Jesus— He was gone.

Whether I saw a vision of Jesus that windswept day or whether it was only something in my mind, I do not know. It doesn't matter. For I do know that it was a profound spiritual experience and that I have not been quite the same person since. I believe that I take my faith more seriously. I like to think that I'm more forgiving than I used to be. As that centurion learned 2,000 years ago, I too have found that you simply cannot come close to Jesus without being changed.

There it is. The key to surviving the uncertainty of these days. The net that holds us when huge crevices in our future keep opening up. The way we face illness, death and life in a new era. We look to that man on the cross and know him to be the Son of God who is with us always. We cry out to his Spirit to come through our locked doors and besieged city with ample supplies of love and grace to get us through. We reach towards him as we reach toward each other. We offer the hand of grace to Christ with his cross in every way we care for each other. So we go with him to Golgotha and find that he goes with us every step of the way.