

“THE DISCIPLES: DISTRESSED BY THE CROSS”

The Impact of the Cross - Part 2

Mark 14:27-31, 43-50

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn contributed more to the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union than perhaps any other individual. Since his views were considered subversive, he was arrested and suffered for years in a communist concentration camp. He had to struggle with back-breaking labor and slow starvation. But Charles Swindoll reports that one day the hopelessness became too much for him and he saw no purpose in fighting on. So, laying his shovel aside, he walked over to a worksite bench and sat down in exhaustion. He knew that at any moment a Russian guard would come over and order him back to work, and that if he refused the guard would bludgeon him to death—probably with his own shovel. He had seen it happen a number of times.

But as he sat waiting, his head down, he felt a presence. Slowly he lifted his eyes, and next to him sat an old man with a wrinkled and utterly expressionless face. And the man, hunching over, dragged a stick through the sand at Solzhenitsyn’s feet, deliberately tracing the sign of the cross. As Solzhenitsyn stared at the rough outline, his entire perspective shifted. He knew that he was only one man against the all-powerful Russian Empire, yet at that moment he also knew that the hope of all mankind is represented in that simple cross. And he knew that with that cross all things are possible. So he slowly got up, picked up his shovel, and went back to work—not knowing that his writings on truth and freedom would inflame the world, and eventually help to bring down the Berlin Wall. Such is the power of that cross!

Maybe I’m talking to somebody today who is discouraged. Maybe you’re troubled about finances, or grief-stricken over the loss of a loved one, or worried about a wayward family member, or tormented by some hurt in your life. If you are distressed today, I want you, in the next few minutes, to look to the cross and be consoled. It is incredible that that emblem of suffering and shame has become an incentive for endurance and pride. In Galatians chapter 6, verse 14, Paul said, *“May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ...”*.

So let’s look at the cross this morning through the eyes of the disciples. Last week we looked at the cross from the perspective of the soldiers who had hard hearts. But today I want us to look at the cross through the perspective of the disciples of Jesus, men who had heavy hearts. And I want you to think what they thought, and to try to feel what they felt. But most importantly, I want you to rediscover the elation that they realized after they understood the meaning of the cross.

I. THE DISCIPLES WERE *DISILLUSIONED* WITH JESUS.

When the disciples first saw Jesus hanging on that cross, they were not only grief-stricken, I think they were *disillusioned* with Jesus.

They had been convinced that He was the long-awaited *Messiah*, the Savior of the world.

And they had good reason to believe that. They had witnessed Jesus performing miracles—from the turning of water into wine, to the raising of Lazarus from the dead. They had seen Him transfigured before them. They had been captivated by His teaching. They had heard Him confirm His deity. They had participated in the triumphal entry. And they knew He was the Messiah. They had left their occupations to follow Him. They believed in Him with all of their hearts.

But the disciples had a misconception about what the Messiah would do. They thought the Messiah was going to be a powerful political ruler. He would overthrow that hated Roman Empire and would reestablish the reign of King David. And they were eager to be a part of that. They would say, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore your kingdom to Israel?” Or, “Jesus, when you get on the throne, would you grant that my brother and me could have positions of power right next to you?” They had completely overlooked the Old Testament predictions that the Messiah would be led like a sheep to the slaughter, that He would suffer, that He would be despised and rejected of men. And when Jesus warned them that He was going to die, they ignored Him. Or at least they thought He was speaking figuratively. You know, we say, “Boy, our team is going to get killed!” Or we say, “The competition is going to annihilate us!” And they thought maybe Jesus was speaking figuratively.

And Jesus tried to communicate with these immature disciples as best as He could that He was going to die, but Simon Peter said, “No, Lord, you’re not going to die!” In Luke 9:44 Jesus said very clearly, “I am going to be betrayed into the hands of men.” But we’re told in the next verse, *“They did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it”* (Luke 9:45). They just couldn’t get over their paradigm that Jesus was going to be the political Messiah. So when He was arrested late at night and then nailed to a cross by 9:00 a.m. the next morning, they were not only shocked, but they were disillusioned. They just couldn’t believe it. *“We had hoped,”* two of the disciples said, *“that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel”* (Luke 24:21).

And let me say to you, you can be disillusioned with Jesus if you have a *misconception* of what Jesus will do for you.

There’s a country song that says, “I don’t care if it rains or freezes, as long as I have my plastic Jesus sitting on the dashboard of my car.” I love country songs, don’t you? I mean, they always have such depth to them! But there are some people who have about that shallow of a concept of Jesus.

Back in the first church I served there was a middle-aged woman who came forward one Sunday, gave her life to Jesus, and was baptized. And about a month later she had dropped out of the church. We asked her what was wrong, and she said, “Well a week after I got baptized my teenage daughter announced that she was pregnant out of wedlock, and Christianity just hasn’t worked for me. I tried to do the right thing and that’s what happens!”

If you see Jesus as your own *personal defender* who will protect you against all disappointment with people, you will be disillusioned. Just look what happened to Jesus. When he died on the cross, all of his friends had forsaken Him.

If you see Jesus as a *rich benefactor* who will grant you wealth and success in all you do, you will be disillusioned. Just look at the cross. He died penniless.

If you see Jesus as a *wise counselor* who will solve all your problems and give you family harmony all the time, you will be disillusioned. Just look at Jesus. When he died His mother was by His side, but there’s no mention of his father. Perhaps His father had died. And His brothers didn’t believe in Him.

If you see Jesus as a *great physician* who will heal all of your diseases, you will be disillusioned. Because look at Jesus. Few people suffered the way He did. And He died at age 33.

I’ll hear athletes every once in a while say, “I took that last second shot and I just prayed to God that it would go in, and God guided it right into the rim and through the net!” And I have mixed emotions when I hear that. I’m glad they’re giving credit to God, but I worry that they will be disillusioned, that there will come a time when they shoot and pray that it will go in and it won’t—or maybe that somebody on the other team is praying that they miss! And they’re going to be disillusioned. Or later in life they’ll pray that their children will be perfect, and they’ll be disillusioned. Or they’ll pray that it won’t be cancer, and they’ll be disillusioned.

You see, Jesus is our Protector, our Benefactor, our Counselor, our Great Physician. But we have to see Him in light of the character that He develops in us and in light of the eternity that He’s going to grant to us.

A number of years ago I went with the Senior Minister and three of the elders at the church I served in Tennessee to the home of a woman in our church. She had requested that we come to her house to anoint her with oil and pray for her healing, according to James 5. Margaret was a woman in her early 60s, but she had been diagnosed with a cancer that would eventually take her life. And when we arrived at the home she was in great spirits, had a wonderful attitude, feeling pretty well. And she began to relate how thankful to God she was for the life she had lived. She had a loving husband and several children who were all faithful to the Lord, who were rearing her grandchildren to know the Lord. A number of years

previous she had been diagnosed with another major disease and had prayed to get well, and she felt that God had given her a number of additional years. And she was just grateful for what God had done. But she had called us there to pray for her healing. She believed that God can do that. She wanted to live. She'd seen some dramatic answers to prayer. But she also had a realistic faith and an understanding of who Jesus is. And she knew that sometimes the Lord chooses to heal people temporarily, and sometimes He chooses to make them perfect for eternity. And so she asked us to pray for her healing, "If it was God's will," she said. That's an impressive faith.

It reminds me of the faith of Job, who said, "*Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him...*" (13:15). And of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who were about to be thrown into a fiery furnace. And they said to the king, "Our God is able to deliver us. But even if He doesn't, we'll still believe in him" (Daniel 3:16-17). And of Paul, who said, "If I live I'm the Lord's, and if I die I'm the Lord's. And whether I live or die, I'm the Lord's" (Romans 14:8). That's an understanding of who Jesus really is in light of eternity. That's a faith that looks at the cross and says, "Lord Jesus, wherever you lead I will follow—even if I have to take up my cross and follow you."

II. THE DISCIPLES WERE *DISTRAUGHT* BY THE ENEMIES.

But the disciples were not only disillusioned with Jesus, they were *distraught* by the evil of their day.

Jesus had some *fierce* enemies from the very beginning.

There were these jealous religious leaders who were always lurking on the fringe trying to trap Jesus in a trick question, trying to get Him to say something that would make Him look stupid. The Sadducees said, "Now Jesus, you say that there's life after death. Let's suppose that a woman marries seven brothers and they die one by one. Now when she gets to Heaven, whose wife is she going to be?" And the Pharisees came to Him and said, "Jesus, this woman was guilty of adultery. We caught her in the very act. Now the Law says she should be stoned. What do you say?" "Jesus, why don't your disciples fast?" "Jesus, who do you think you are, healing on the Sabbath Day?!" And they became so angered by their inability to trap Him, and so envious of Jesus' popularity, that they plotted to arrest Him and kill Him.

And Mark 14:43 says, "*...a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders [came to arrest Jesus].*"

Now when they found Jesus in the Garden in Gethsemane, they started to arrest Him. Simon Peter drew a sword out from under his cloak and started to attack. But Jesus interrupted Him and said, "No, Peter. If you live by the sword you're going to die by the sword." So when Jesus willingly submitted to arrest, the disciples, all of them, fled out of fear.

They disappeared. Wouldn't you? There was just eleven of them, and there were hundreds of the enemy that night. They were just fisherman, and these were soldiers. They had just one sword, but there were many clubs and spears and weapons against them. They were so overwhelmed by the opposition. And when they looked at the cross they were just distraught by the power of their enemies.

You know, it's easy for us to be distraught over the onslaught of *evil* in the world.

The opposition to Jesus Christ can seem so ominous. And the cross sometimes looks pretty weak, doesn't it?

I read recently that pornography has doubled in profitability in the last 5 years. But there has not been one indictment of a hardcore pornographer since 2007. We just kind of run. The elected leaders of our country can endorse homosexual rights groups, vote to overturn a bill that bans partial birth abortions, make a mockery of the Constitution, and millions caught up in the emotion are willing to overlook it all. I don't know what your reaction to that is, but the lack of character of the American people greatly distresses me. And we say, "What's happening?" Evil seems so powerful and we seem so weak and helpless.

Now some Christians, like Simon Peter, want to fight with worldly weapons. And they will say, "Let's bomb the abortion clinics," or "let's write some mean-spirited letters to the editor," or "let's spread false rumors about the opposition." But 2 Corinthians 10:3 says, "*For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world*" (vv. 3-4). I think the Lord would say to us individually, and as a church, "Don't lose your confidence in the cross!" Jesus said, "*Heaven and earth are going to pass away, but my word will never pass away*" (Matthew 24:35). It has awesome power to persevere and to win in the end.

The Roman Empire seemed so oppressive, persecuting Christians. But the Roman Empire collapsed and the cross still stands. Communism seemed so powerful to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. I mean, what could he do? He was just one man. But the Berlin Wall fell, and the Soviet Union collapsed, and the cross still stands. And the powers of evil seem so strong today. But Jesus said, "*If I be lifted up, I will draw all men to myself*" (John 12:32). That's why, when Paul went into the wicked city of Corinth, he said, "*I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified*" (1 Corinthians 2:2).

The movie *Amistad*, by Steven Spielberg, has some African slaves that instigate a mutiny on the ship coming to America. They take over the ship. But then an American Naval vessel overtakes them and they're brought to America and put on trial for murder. Now they don't understand English, and they don't much understand what's going on, but there is a group of Christian abolitionists who are fighting for their freedom. But as they were led to the courthouse for their ruling, the slaves looked over the courthouse roof and see three crosses.

In reality it was just the masthead of ships in the harbor, but they think they are being led to be crucified. Because they had pictures in the English Bible in the cell and saw that that's what happened to Jesus, and they assumed that that's the way they executed people in America.

But what they did not know was that prior to the trial the judge, wrestling with this decision, had gone to church and knelt before the cross. And even though the President of the United States wanted him to rule against the slaves, the judge set them free. And the cross was more powerful than the Presidency. And the power of the cross was more powerful than the bigotry of that community.

That's why Paul said, "The preaching of the cross is foolishness to the Jews, and weakness and a stumbling block to the Greeks. But to those of us who are saved, it is the wisdom and the power of God" (see 1 Corinthians 1:18 ff.). That's why the words to the song say, "I believe in God, the Almighty King. God, the Creator of all things. Holy Father, my heart sings. I believe your Word will never fail. I believe your kingdom will prevail. I believe He reigns eternally. In Him I believe."

III. THE DISCIPLES WERE *DISAPPOINTED* IN THEMSELVES.

There's a third reason the disciples were distressed, and that is, they were *disappointed* in themselves.

I think when they looked at that cross, they had to feel guilty that they had been so *cowardly*.

Look at the Scripture text for today, Mark 14, beginning with verse 27. Jesus said, *"You will all fall away, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Peter declared, 'Even if all fall away, I will not.'* *'Truly I tell you,' Jesus answered, 'today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times.'* *But Peter insisted emphatically, 'Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.'* *And all the others said the same"* (vv. 27-31).

But we read in verse 50 that they all forsook Him and fled. Max Lucado says, "They scampered like a bunch of scarred cats and didn't stop until they had ducked into every available hole in Jerusalem." I wonder what they did that weekend? I wonder if any of them even dared to sneak back to the hillside and stand at the edge of the crowd and stare at the three silhouettes on the hill? John was there, because Jesus said to John, "John, behold your mother." But we don't read of any other disciple being there. They had to be on the fringe. And when they looked at the cross, they had to feel guilty. "We were so cowardly. We denied Him in the hour when He needed us. Perhaps we could have prevented it." They saw Jesus dying, and they saw their own sin.

Now we all know what it is to feel guilty. But we have a tendency to make light of our own transgressions. “It’s not all that big a deal.” We’d like to pretend that sin doesn’t matter. “Why do you get upset about lying? It’s just a spin.” “Why do you get upset about adultery? I mean, it’s just sex.” “Don’t get all up in the air about the parties that your kids are participating in, they’re just sowing their wild oats.”

But the cross demonstrates that sin is no trifling matter. **The cross is a reminder of our sin.**

Sin nailed Jesus to the cross. You can’t look at the pictures of the emaciated Jews in a Nazi concentration camp, about to be gassed, without saying, “Boy, sin can do some horrible things.” And look at the cross and realize it’s what we call “little sins” that nailed Jesus there. The envy of the religious leaders, the indifference of Pontius Pilate, the spin of the false witnesses, the greed of Judas, the prejudice of the soldiers, the cowardice of the disciples—those are the sins that combined to nail Jesus to the cross. There’s a T-shirt that has a picture of Jesus dying on the cross, and the words on the T-shirt read: “If I’m okay, and you’re okay, how do you explain this?” First Peter 2:24 says, *“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree...”*.

Henry Nouwen tells about a doctor in Paraguay who spoke out against the oppressive government. And the local police took revenge against him by arresting his teenage son and torturing him to death. It was a brutal and senseless murder. But the father then responded with the most powerful protest imaginable. At the funeral the father did not have his son’s body cleaned up, embalmed, and made to appear as attractive as possible. In fact, he displayed it as he found it in the jail—naked, scarred, twisted, open sores from the beatings and burns from the cigarettes. And all the villagers passed by this grotesque corpse, which lay not in a coffin, but on the blood-soaked mattress from the prison. And it was a hard story. But the reality of what had happened was not covered up.

God allowed Jesus Christ to be crucified in public and tortured so that we could see the complete hideousness of our sin. And we look to the cross and we say, “Father, I have sinned. Forgive me.” And if that’s all we see, we’re distressed.

But there were two factors that changed the cross from an instrument of distress to one of hope and victory.

The first, of course, was the *resurrection* of Jesus Christ from the grave.

When the disciples stumbled down Golgotha, they were certainly distressed. But three days later, when they were meeting behind locked doors for fear of the Jews, suddenly Jesus Christ appeared to them alive. And their hopes were revived. Their attitudes were completely transformed. He was the Messiah. He had conquered death. He had conquered sin. And

now they were jubilant. Romans 1:4 says that Jesus *“was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead....”*

Charles Swindoll wrote about a kindergarten teacher who was telling her kids in a Christian school about Jesus. And she could tell by the expression of one of the little boy's that he was understanding it for the very first time. And when she came to describe the cross tears came in his eyes, and he said, “Oh, that's too bad!” But in the next breath she told him about the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave, and that He's alive today. And the boy's eyes lit up like saucers and he said, “Totally awesome!”

And if your understanding of Jesus is defined by “that's too bad,” you don't really understand who He is. Because early in the morning on the first day of the week, Jesus Christ came alive out of that grave, proving that He's the Son of God. And it's totally awesome! That's why we don't display a crucifix, but an empty cross. Because Jesus is no longer on that cross. He's no longer in the tomb. He is risen, indeed!

The second reason that the cross was transformed from an instrument of despair to one of joy for the disciples was their understanding of the *purpose* of the cross.

The cross was not an accident. The cross was not even a temporary victory for Jesus' enemies. The cross was designed by God from the creation of the world to be a payment for the sins of all mankind. God had said from the beginning, “If you sin, you will die.” And all men sinned.

But Hebrews 9 says, *“...without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins”* (v. 22).

I don't completely understand that. But in the justice of God, since life is in the blood the Bible says, without the shedding of the blood of a perfect sacrifice, man's sin could never be forgiven. That's what God was attempting to communicate to us in the Old Testament when the Jews had to bring an ox, or a goat, or a perfect lamb, into the temple to sacrifice for their sins. God was conditioning them, “Sin means death. Without the shedding of blood there's no remission of sins.” But the Bible says the blood of bulls and goats was not sufficient to take away sin.

But when Jesus came, John the Baptist identified Him by saying, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” And Jesus said, “No man takes my life from me, but I give it up of my own accord.” And He went to the cross and He allowed His blood to be shed from head to toe. The crown of thorns pierced His brow, and the blood flowed. The soldiers punched Him in the face and bruised Him, and the blood flowed. The lashes lacerated His back, the cross rubbed His shoulders raw, when He stumbled and fell He skinned His elbows

and knees, the nails pierced His hands and feet, and the spear pierced His side. He was led like a sheep to the slaughter.

But 1 Peter 1:18 says, *“You know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen for you before the creation of the world...”* (vv. 18-20).

The old song was, “What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.” But I think I like the newer one better that says, “The blood of Jesus can make the vilest sinner clean.” (*Song – “Yes, I Know!*) And that’s me.

I recently read a story written by a young man whose fiancée was killed in a tragic car wreck just two weeks before the day they were to be married. He wrote her a letter the day he learned of her death as sort of a way to memorialize her. That letter was read at the girl’s funeral a few days later. Let me just share with you one sentence from that letter. The young man wrote: “Stacy, if Jesus would have given me a choice, I would have died in your place without asking a single question.”

Do you understand that God loved you so much that He died in your place without asking you a single question? He didn’t ask you, “How much are you going to believe? Are you going to be faithful? Are you going to hang in there?” No. *“God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son [to die on a cross], that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:16).