

**Near the Cross 5: ANSWERING QUESTIONS**  
**Matthew 27:35-44 (AFBC 3/13/16)**

**<sup>35</sup> When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. <sup>36</sup> And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. <sup>37</sup> Above his head they placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS.**

**<sup>38</sup> Two rebels were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. <sup>39</sup> Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads <sup>40</sup> and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!" <sup>41</sup> In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. <sup>42</sup> "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! He's the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. <sup>43</sup> He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" <sup>44</sup> In the same way the rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.**

The Bible is full of surprises—have you noticed? If you spend much time studying it, you have to be surprised by what the Bible says--at least, occasionally.

1) Like when Elisha the prophet told Naaman, the Syrian military commander, to go wash in the muddy Jordan River. "Wash seven times," he said, "so your leprosy will be cured."

This confused Naaman, and at first, he questioned whether he should do it. Finally, he went through with it, though, and he was healed.

2) Then there's the story of young David going up against the giant Goliath—with only a slingshot. People who knew David had serious questions and concerns about whether David should attempt this; but, as you recall, David won that battle pretty convincingly.

3) Then how about Joshua and the Israelites marching around the well-fortified city of Jericho—that didn't make sense. People had questions about it until, lo and behold, the walls came a'tumbling down!

But all of these stories, amazing as they are, are nothing when compared with Jesus and His cross. The story of the cross raises all kinds of questions. The Bible, in fact, is very honest in saying that many will find the cross confusing—some will claim the story of the cross is too outlandish to believe.

It's amazing when you start reading the New Testament passages that look back at the cross of Jesus and try to explain what happened there—it's amazing how often they point out how confusing the cross is for folks. They talk openly about the controversial side of what happened at Calvary. Have you ever noticed this?

We're going to take a look at several of these texts in a moment, but first I want to share with you an excerpt from a book by Max Lucado. The book is called, *No Wonder They Call Him the Savior*.

Lucado does a great job at capturing the confusion that is so rampant in the world concerning the cross of Jesus. Listen to what he writes:

*"The cross. It rests on the time line of history like a compelling diamond. Its tragedy summons all sufferers. Its absurdity attracts all cynics. Its hope lures all searchers... History has idolized it and despised it, gold-plated it and burned it, worn and trashed it. History has done everything to it but ignore it.*

*That's the one option that the cross does not offer. No one can ignore it! You can't ignore a piece of lumber that suspends the greatest claim in history. Its bottom line is sobering: ...if the account is true, it is history's hinge. Period. ...If not, it is history's hoax. That's why the cross is what matters."*

It's not hard to sense the confusion in those words, is it? "History's hinge or... its hoax!?" When Lucado wrote that, he was being very true to the witness of God's word. The Bible readily acknowledges that there is much confusion in our world about the cross of Jesus.

Join with me now as we take a journey through Scripture to not only see what's so confusing, but also—and this is what really matters--to make sure we know where we stand, what we believe, when it comes to Jesus and His cross.

1) Nowhere does Scripture point to the questions surrounding the cross more clearly than in this passage from I Corinthians 1:18—  
“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

And now verses 23-24: “...but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

You hear all the questions surrounding the cross of Christ. One side says that the cross is a stumbling block and foolishness. But the other side says the cross is the power of God and wisdom of God. Two very different ways of seeing and understanding the cross—those answers cannot both be right!

God’s people had waited for a Messiah for a long time. They prayed for God’s great deliverer—the One who would come in power and set them free. But Jesus wasn’t quite what they had in mind for a Messiah, and they saw nothing about the cross that had anything to do with their freedom.

It was inconceivable to them, in fact, that God’s Messiah would die on a cross. It was a stumbling block. It was just too different from what they had imagined. It raised too many questions.

And then there were the philosophers of the Greco-Roman world--they found this whole message of the cross repulsive. They thought it absurd that God could reveal Himself in such a sordid, bloody fashion. It was foolishness, they said.

But then there were those who believed in Jesus and were being saved. And for them, the cross was neither a stumbling block, nor was it foolishness. It was the power and wisdom of God; and through that cross, God was making wonderful changes in them.

The cross, you see, speaks to a problem that goes far beyond what mere philosophies or moral codes can solve. The problem is sin--our sin--and its best buddy, death. It’s about sin committed against a loving, but righteous God--a gracious, but Holy God.

Because of His nature, God could not ignore our sin. He had to take our guilt seriously. In His wisdom, He chose to redeem us in such a way as to let us know how ugly our sin problem is; yet at the same time, to reveal to us His amazing mercy and love.

The cross was God's answer—His brilliant, nobody-but-God-could-have-thought-of-it answer--for our sin. The cross makes us recognize our guilt, but it also makes us understand God's incredible desire to save us from our sin. The price of sin is high—death--but God pays that price in full.

**Emil Brunner**, the great Protestant theologian, in his book called *Our Faith*, tells a story which helps us understand what God did for us by way of cross. He writes:

**“Suppose a farmhand set fire to his master's barn. The man is liable for the damages with all that he has. The master could take everything the servant has--shoes, clothing, money and say, 'All of this is only a small part of what my servant really owes me. And now let the scoundrel get out of my sight!'**

**But the master does nothing of the sort, takes nothing away. He rather says to his faithless servant, 'I will take everything upon myself; I will pay everything.' And then the servant opens his eyes in amazement; for he sees what a good master he has.”**

This is how God has dealt with us through the cross. Christ Jesus took our sin upon Himself, He suffered the death that we deserved, paid sin's penalty for us, that we might open our eyes to the goodness of God and thus be drawn to God and reconciled to God and fall in love with God for all time and eternity.

To some, that sounds like foolishness. But to those of us who have personally experienced the power of the Gospel, we know this to be God's wisdom...and our only hope of salvation.

So, is Jesus' cross just our foolishness, or is it God's wisdom? Is it a stumbling block, or the power of God to save us? These are important questions, and we must decide what's true.

2) Let's keep going. In the 27<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, we find more questions about Jesus and His cross. Verse 35 reads: **"When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots."**

To the soldiers, this was just another crucifixion. They cast lots to see who got what among Jesus' belongings. They did this with all their victims. There was nothing special to them about this crucifixion.

Matthew, though, along with the early church, sees something far more significant here. They understand this to be the fulfillment of prophecy.

The cross of Christ was the completion of a plan which God devised before the foundation of the world. It was hinted at by the prophets; and now, through Jesus' cross, it was accomplished!

The soldiers saw the death of Jesus as just another routine job. But the Gospel says, 'No, this is far more. It's literally life changing! This is the sinless Lamb of God taking away the sin of the world!

This is God carrying out His plan to save a lost humanity. This is God in Christ--yes, even there on that ugly, merciless cross--this is God in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.

So the question we must answer is this: which is it? Who's right! Is Jesus' death just another sad example of society ridding itself of one of its undesirables? Or is there more to it than that?

More questions: Is the cross the central element in God's plan to save us (i.e., "the hinge of history," as Lucado put it)? Even more basic than that: Did Jesus die for you and me?

How do we answer these questions? Where do we stand on this issue? What do we believe?

3) Before we finish, let's look at one other source of questions about Jesus' cross—questions to which we must give answers. First, **Matthew 27:37-38:**

**Above his head they placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS. <sup>38</sup> Two rebels were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left.**

And then **Acts 2:36: "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."**

Three crosses stood on "the place of the skull." Three men were crucified. In your mind's eye, look at them. What do you see?

Some see three criminals; but the eyes of faith see two criminals...and the Son of God. More questions. Hard questions.

And the direction we take here is the most important decision that we have to make. For this decision has to do with the identity of the one on that middle cross. Some say that Jesus was a criminal. He deserved to die.

>The religious leaders accused him of false teaching, breaking the Sabbath law, blasphemy.

>>The Romans saw him as a threat to the empire- he was accused of seeking to become King of the Jews. He was for them a religious heretic and a political radical. Crucifixion was their answer for this menace to society--so they killed him.

But then there is the conviction Peter states so well in his sermon at Pentecost: "...God hath made that same Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

His opponents saw the cross as the elimination of an enemy, but Jesus saw it as the accomplishment of what he had come to this earth to do. "No one takes (my life) from me," He said, "but I lay it down of my own accord."

On another occasion, Jesus said, "The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep." And another: "I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people unto me."

Listen: 1) Either the one who hung on that central cross was who He said he was, or He was a terribly deranged person.

2) Either He was the Christ, Son of man and Son of God, or He was just another criminal.

3) Either His death on the cross is the wisdom and power of God to save us, or it's sheer foolishness. It is one or the other, and we cannot remain neutral.

a) We either embrace Jesus Christ, or we reject Him.

b) We believe that he has died for our sins or refuse to believe.

c) We accept the salvation He offers, or we tell Him "NO."

These are questions that must be answered, friends. Decide!  
Right now, decide!

I believe with all my heart that Jesus Christ is God's Son, that He died on Calvary's cross to save us from the power of sin and death and to reconcile us with God.

I have accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord. And that commitment brings meaning to my life. It gives me a sense of fulfillment and purpose, peace and joy.

And I believe that Jesus Christ can do the same for you—that He wants to do this for you now--if you'll open your heart to Him and invite Him to come in.