

The Old Rugged Cross: The Death of Jesus in the Letters of Paul

Introduction

January 14, 2008

“What’s Good about Good Friday?” That was the theme of the ecumenical Good Friday service one of the years I served a congregation in Tulare, California. Four of us preached five minutes short sermons for this event. The pastors were Baptist, Pentecostal, UCC and me, the Lutheran. I was the only person who had anything remotely positive to say about the death of Christ. To my surprise, for the rest of the pastors, Good Friday was not good in and of itself – in fact, it was a time for us to mentally beat ourselves down because our sins caused the death of Jesus. The only thing good about Good Friday was the fact that Easter Sunday was only a few days away, and resurrection is something that Christians can really get a handle on.

The trouble with this is, the Bible is clear that Good Friday was indeed good for us. In the gospels, it is clear that it is the death of Jesus that reconciles us to God - not the resurrection, but Christ’s death. After all, it is at the death of Jesus that the curtain of the temple is torn in two, thus indicating that the age-old separation of a Holy God from sinful humanity has forever been destroyed, and that now God is out among us, making us holy by his very presence in our lives. But I think that no Biblical writer had more appreciation for the death of Jesus and its meaning for our lives than the apostle Paul.

Paul came to an appreciation of the meaning of the cross slowly. When we first encounter Paul in the Bible, he is an enemy of Christianity. He cannot understand how any group, especially those who understood the God of the Old Testament, could believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah. He had been crucified as a common criminal, weak and helpless on a cross. The Scripture even said, “Cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree,” a verse Paul reflects upon in Galatians 3. However, when Paul encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, and he was given the charge to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, it was clear that he had been wrong about Jesus. He had to think deeply about what it meant that the weak and helpless Jesus who died naked and forsaken on the cross was indeed the chosen Messiah of God. As he reflected on this paradox (God worked most powerfully through one who seemed most weak), he planted churches and was responsible for their spiritual nurture. In letters to those churches, he developed his understanding of how the cross functioned in God’s plan for the world, and how it still functions for us. We believe the Holy Spirit guided this development, and Paul would have been the first to say that Good Friday was indeed good for all humanity, for through the cross we are not only reconciled to God but we come to understand more about how God is at work in the world.

In this class, we will look at passages from a few of Paul’s letters which speak of the meaning of the cross for our faith and our lives. It is my hope that out of this class, we will not longer see Good Friday simply as a day of mourning for Jesus, or as a day of mental self-flagellation for our sins, but as a day on which God was powerfully at work defeating the forces of sin, death and the devil for us.