

One of the lowest points in the history of man was the crucifixion of Christ. In another sense it was one of the highest points. A near total rejection of God occurred here, but it was overshadowed by the outpouring of God's unfailing love for man. In the midst of the trial of Christ, one man gave some advice. In John 18:12-14,

Then the detachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish officials arrested Jesus. They bound him and brought him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it would be good if one man died for the people.

Caiaphas knew that the Roman government would not tolerate riotous behavior on the part of any of its subject peoples. He therefore decided that rather than risk the lives of people of his nation if things got out of his control he would sacrifice the one man Jesus Christ, no matter if he was innocent or not. Now this seems like a smart thing to do. As the country music song goes, "They crucify the innocent, and let the guilty go!" But is it right? Is it right to sacrifice one for the sake of the group? Even if that one is innocent? Is this what we would do? Would Christ have done this? These are some of the questions that I would like to take a few minutes here to address.

We might ask before we go much further if this idea really worked. If it doesn't work, then it doesn't matter how good it sounds it is not the best thing to do. In the case of the crucifixion, we know that Christ was not really the cause of the problem. The Jewish people themselves were like a powder keg that was ready to go off at any moment. Their pride in their own value kept them hostile to any form of servitude. So the death of Christ for the sake of the nation did not prevent that same nation from dying by Roman hands in A.D. 70. This was when the Jews rebelled and Jerusalem was destroyed.

What we're really doing is sacrificing someone for the sake of a structure. You might choose to save the group if you did not know the individual personally; but God knows each of us in a very personal way and will not sacrifice us like this. Christ did not operate in one place, with a big building and a large permanent congregation; he went out and touched **individuals**. Of course he spoke to masses, too. But he was deeply concerned with the one-on-one interaction.

One story about him that illustrates this is found in John 9. Jesus was walking along and saw a man blind from birth. To demonstrate the power of God, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. He then told him to go wash in the Pool of Siloam. When the man did this he went home able to see. When his acquaintances began to ask how this happened, he replied, "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see." When the Pharisees heard of it they were upset because this deed, even though it was a very good deed, was performed on the Sabbath. Of course we know that their real problem was the popularity of Christ and their own loss of popularity. They argued with the healed man and even went to his parents to try to deny the healing power and truth of Christ. His parents were very cagey because the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue. They were so incensed at the consistent testimony of the one who was healed that they hurled insults at him and threw him out of the congregation.

Now the interesting part is this. Jesus didn't care about the multitudes that he might have won by conforming to the ways of the Pharisees. Instead, when Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, he sought him out; and when he had found him, he said (vss 35-38),

"Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

"Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe in him."

Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you."

Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshipped him.

This was indeed what Christ was after; an individual interaction which led to true worship. The healed man worshipped Christ even though it meant the loss of fellowship with the community. Christ's ministry was to the weak who in their need responded to him with their whole heart! Large numbers were not his primary interest.

This principle of standing up for one rather than sacrificing them for the group was expressed by Jesus in one of his parables, found in Matthew 18:12ff. After talking about the purpose of Christ, to seek and save the lost, Jesus has this to say,

"What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

How powerful this love is that God has for us. It would be easy to argue that it would be much better to let the single lost lamb go so that the shepherd could protect a larger number of sheep. Why run the risk of losing 99 when only one is lost. But God wants to show us the individual nature of his love, how it points to you and me as we seem to be covered up by a sea of humanity. Christ gave his life for each and every one of us, and he does not want a single soul to be lost. God calls every star by name, and he knows and loves each one of us as well. We must stress a ministry to individuals, where we are not worried about being the big dog. Too many people think that they must find a place of honor and glory in a multitude. This breeds infighting and backstabbing: all in the name of the Lord. We see it so easily in others, but not in ourselves. It is much better to have a quiet ministry which truly helps a small group of individuals than try to be loved by all. Remember that the first shall be last and the last first. We should think more about what this means.

It is so easy to forsake someone in need. But this is not the way that Christ acted, as we have already noted. His cry on the cross showed that He understood how forlorn that we can be at times, even though God is always there. David felt it too, as he shows in Psalms 13:1-4:

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, O LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death; my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

David prays for the Lord to stand beside him; and he finds that the Lord is indeed with him. In verses 5-6 of the same Psalm we read:

But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me.

David found the answer: the unfailing love of God. We should try with all of our hearts to have that same kind of love in us. We must be steadfast in our concern for others. When Christ was going to go to Jerusalem for the Passover in spite of the Pharisee's known desire to kill him, the apostle Thomas gives one of the most beautiful statements ever uttered by man in John 11:16, "Let us go with him so that we may die with him." Here is true devotion. Here is the kind of caring friendship that we need to come to understand.

Unfortunately, we know that this devotion was interrupted by the events that followed. Thomas and Peter, so bold in their outward conversation, both left Jesus when he was arrested. There was no one who stood by Jesus when he had to endure the trial; not a single voice in his favor is recorded. Only the crowd's shout "Crucify Him, Crucify Him!" echoed in his ears. And He was taken to the cross where he offered himself to save us.

There is a native American saying that I am reminded of here. It goes something like this:

Love your friend and never desert him. If you see him surrounded by the enemy do not run away; go to him, and if you cannot save him, be killed together and let your bones lie side by side.

Christ was something like this, except he died knowing that it would save us. But he loved us like that. We all need someone to "Stand by Me;" Christ fills that place. But we must also stand by those who need us here on this earth. There is something about this that is so beautiful to me, and I want to be that way, too. Max Lucado in his book [A Gentle Thunder](#) writes that there are "two gardens... In the first, Adam took a fall. In the second, Jesus took a stand." Indeed he has stood up for all of us and will stand in the presence of God to claim us as His own.

God has always stood up for widows and orphans and anyone who were helpless and alone. Everyone is familiar with James 1:27, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted

by the world." Christ didn't come just for the big groups of those who know how to take care of themselves. He said in Mark 2:17, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

We have all felt alone at times. Even the great prophet Elijah felt alone even after a tremendous victory over Ahab & Jezebel; even after God gave him the strength to run for 40 days. Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. In the desert he sat down and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." After sleeping awhile, an angel fed him and strengthened by that food he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. Let's read now from 1 Kings 19:9-10:

There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

After demonstrations from the Lord of a great and powerful wind which tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks, then an earthquake, then a fire, then a gentle whisper, this same conversation was held again. Then Elijah was told that he was not alone; not only was God with him but there were still 7000 in Israel who had not bowed down to the false god of Ahab. No one is truly alone who has God, but God also uses people as support for others.

David in the twenty-third Psalm talks about the valley of the shadow of death. I imagine this as a very lonely place, too. How comforting to know that there is someone with you in any kind of trouble. In the New Testament, Stephen was stoned to death for his beliefs. But he saw Christ as he died and took great comfort knowing that Christ was standing with him. We must take the same kind of opportunities to stand with those we love in their time of greatest trial.

The beauty of the gospel is that not only does Christ stand beside us, but he stands in our place. Cecil Hook writes in his book Free to Speak, "Must Jesus continually plead for us before an angry, or more remote, God? Such a concept of mediation was born of Catholic theology. His intercession does not consist of his offering prayers for us but in the continuous merit of his once-for-all atonement...(Hebrews 7.25). He is our Advocate - 'to call to one's side' - not to plead our case but to stand in our place as our propitiation. We continue to be in him, walking in the light of fellowship, so that his offering continues to make us acceptable to God - reconciled. There is no greater friend than Jesus. But we must try to be an extension of him on earth. Let us always strive to comfort others by being there for them as Christ is for us. We must not seek the popularity and glory of ministry to the big crowds but be involved with a one-on-one service of love to those who need it the most.