

“WHAT DO YOU SEE WHEN YOU BEHOLD THE CROSS?”

Have you ever had someone show you a picture and say, “What do you see in this picture?”

--Maybe it's the famous Old Woman/Young Woman optical illusion picture. People often easily see **one** or the **other**—but most will **see both** after you tell them **both** are there!

--Or maybe it's the not-so-famous picture **I have** on my phone of a moss-covered Indianhead carved into a limestone wall. **Some people see it** when I tell them what to look for; **others don't**.

--And then there's the one I've seen recently on a Facebook reel that I'm not entirely sure what it is! The caption suggests it's some kind of creepy creature, but to me it looks like a bald-headed man sitting on a rocky riverbank wrapped up in a brightly colored blanket. Every once in a while, he sticks his head out of the blanket. From the opposite end of the lake, it looks like some weird kind of creature sticking out its tongue!

The point? We can **look at things** and **not comprehend** exactly what it is that we are looking at! And that, I believe, was the case for those that witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus! Take your Bibles and turn to Luke 23. Notice what it says in vs 32-34. Now vs 35 “And the people stood beholding.”

Now jump ahead to vs 44 and follow along as I read through vs 49. Here again, we see various groups of people “beholding” what was taking place—and yet not truly understanding what it was they were looking at! And that is still the case today!

We obviously can't go back and witness the actual, physical crucifixion of Jesus, can we? But...we can read—in the Bible—the firsthand accounts of some of those who were there! On top of that, God Himself gives us a **detailed explanation** of what took place on the cross!

And yet, there are still many who have **heard** about the cross...and **know** about the cross...and have **read** about the cross, that still **don't understand** what they are “beholding” when they **look** at the cross! So the question I want us to consider this morning is this: “What Do You See When You Behold the Cross?”

1. The spectators that were beholding

Notice again vs 35: “And the people stood beholding.” **Who** were the spectators?

--In vs 21-23, we see that it was some of the group that wanted Jesus crucified—many of which had welcomed Him to Jerusalem just a week earlier with palm branches and shouts of “Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord” (John 12:13).

--In the second half of vs 35, we see it was “the rulers;” in Matthew's account (Mt 27:41) they are referred to as the “chief priests, scribes, and elders.”

--In vs 36, we see that soldiers are there.

--Vs 47 refers to one soldier in particular—a centurion.

--And in vs 49, we see “all His acquaintance, and the women that followed Him from Galilee.”

--That means the disciples were probably there—and possibly His siblings—although way in the back!

--We know the apostle John was there because Jesus passed off the responsibility of His mother's care to John as seen in John 19:26-27.

--Also in John 19, some of the women referred to here are named. **John 19:25** “Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene.”

--In Mark 15, the name of **Salome** is mentioned, and then a reference to “many other women which came up with Him unto Jerusalem” (from Galilee).

--And what about those who **had been healed** by Jesus? Although we don't know for sure, I can't help but think that there were a number of them in this group of people that stood “beholding.”

Next, let's consider... **2. The spectacle they beheld**

Why am I calling it a **spectacle**? Because that is the word Luke uses in vs 48! Notice what it says: “And all the people that came together to that **sight**...”

“Sight” comes from the Greek word “theh-o-REE-ah” and is **used only here** in the Greek New Testament.

It means “something watched; a spectacle” and is the root of the English words “theater” and “theatrical” (Biblehub.com). Here’s some **helpful historical background** from Biblehub.com: “Public executions in Roman Palestine were **intentionally staged events**. Golgotha lay beside a major thoroughfare, ensuring maximum visibility. Rome leveraged such spectacles to deter disorder; the Sanhedrin saw in them an opportunity to disgrace a perceived blasphemer.”

Here’s another important thing to keep in mind—Rome rarely crucified their **own** citizens! **Why?** Because it was an extremely shameful—and painful—way to die! For the Romans, death by crucifixion was reserved for “slaves, disgraced soldiers, and political activists.” (<https://www.livescience.com/65283-crucifixion-history.html>).

So **what was** the spectacle that the people “beheld” that day? I believe it would have fallen into two categories: what they **expected** to see—and what they **didn’t expect** to see.

A. What they expected to see

What did they expect to see? At a minimum, they expected to see a crucifixion—and they expected to see Christ! **1) The crucifixion.** **Why** would people go and be spectators at a crucifixion? For some, they had a **strange fascination** with death by torture! **How** do we know that? Because a main form of entertainment for the Romans was to gather in arenas and **watch gladiators** trying to kill one another—or **wild animals** trying to kill **the gladiators!**

So they came to Golgotha—the place of the skull—expecting to see **brutally whipped, half-naked men—nailed to a cross—slowly dying** from dehydration and asphyxiation. But the main “attraction”—if I can use that word—was **not** the crucifixion itself.

Instead, they came because of **Who** was being crucified: **2) The One called the Christ!**

--Notice what it says in vs 35-37. Did they expect to see Jesus mocked? Some did! Even Pilate knew that the chief priests had delivered Jesus to be crucified **because of envy**—not blasphemy!

--Now vs 38. Did they expect to see a sign hung over His head that said, “This is the King of the Jews?”

Some probably did—because that is what He was!

--And my guess is that there were at least a few that expected Jesus to “save” Himself! Their mindset was, “Jesus raised the dead on several occasions, surely He can keep Himself from dying!” And the eleven personally heard Jesus—as He was about to be arrested in the garden of Gethsemane—say, “Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and He shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?”

B. What they didn’t expect to see

The people that were “beholding” the crucifixion of Jesus certainly saw some unusual things that day. The first I want us to consider is... **1) The manner of the Man.** Did Jesus “handle” the crucifixion the way most men did? **No**; He did not! Maybe **some expected** Jesus to handle it differently, but I’m pretty sure most of the “beholders” were surprised that Jesus’ manner—His **demeanor**—and His actions and reactions—were **considerably different** than anything they had seen before!

--There were **no shrieks of pain** or calls for vengeance on those who were wrongly killing Him! Instead—in verse 34—we see the heart of Jesus when He cries out to God, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”

--There were **no replies** to the mockery—and **no attempts to defend** Himself—when the vilest things were said **to Him** and **about Him**. **Isaiah 53:7** “He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth: He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He openeth not His mouth.”

--There was the care for His mother—as already mentioned—but in verse 43, we see **Jesus’ care—and forgiveness of**—one of the men that were crucified next to Him.

--And in verse 46 we see that Jesus was not **losing His life**—it was not being taken from Him—**He is the One deciding** when He was giving it up! And Jesus had said ahead of time that that was how it would happen! **John 10:18** “No man taketh it [life] from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.”

The manner Jesus conducted Himself during the crucifixion wasn't the only unexpected thing the people beheld. Another thing that certainly would have surprised them would have been...

2) The manifestations of God!

--Look at vs 44. Here we see that from the **sixth** hour (noon)—until the **ninth** hour (3:00pm)—"there was a darkness over all the earth." So what was usually the **brightest** part of the day was now the **darkest!**

--Although it's not recorded for us here in Luke, **another manifestation** of God was that there was **an earthquake!** Matthew 27:51 "...and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent"—meaning they split apart. The result of the earthquake? Graves were opened!

--Now vs 45. The **veil of the temple was rent** (tore) in the midst (meaning the middle). In Matthew's account we have more details, namely that it was **torn in two** from the top to the bottom (Mt 27:51)!

I don't know that we can truly fathom just how **amazing, confusing, and probably frightening** it was that the veil of the temple **was torn** in two. **First**, it is important to realize that "the veil of the temple" is **not** a sheer piece of **lacy fabric** that a bride wears over her face when she walks down the aisle on her wedding day!

The veil of the **temple**—constructed during Solomon's reign from 970-930 BC—was a **thick curtain** woven of blue, purple, and crimson (scarlet) yarn—the same color scheme given to Moses for the veil of the **tabernacle** according to II Chronicles 3:14. It was believed to be about **60** feet high, **30** feet wide, and **several inches** thick. Needless to say, with these dimensions, **only God could tear it** from the top to the bottom!

Not only that, the veil served as both a **physical** barrier and a **symbolic** one. It **physically** prevented people from going into the Holy of Holies where the Ark of the Covenant was. **Symbolically**, God dwelt where the Ark of the Covenant was—behind the veil—and no one could go behind the veil into God's presence except the high priest—and only once a year on the Day of Atonement.

So for 1400 plus years—from the time of Moses until the death of Jesus—a thick curtain had separated God and man! And now it was **torn in two!** MacArthur wrote that the chaos and confusion this would have caused at the temple would have been indescribable!

Next, let's consider... **3. The speculation about what they were beholding**

What was the opinion of those that were beholding the things which were done? What was **their understanding** of what was taking place?

--**Mary** would have been crushed to see her Son treated so—and probably thought back on the words Simeon had told her when Jesus was just an infant: "Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also" (Luke 2:35).

--**The disciples** were devastated! Peter had denied that he even knew Jesus and the rest had fled—or followed afar off. Their leader **was dead** and they now feared for their own lives. Their mindset was probably the same as the two men that met Jesus on the road to Emmaus as recorded in Luke 24:21 "But we trusted that it had been He which should have redeemed Israel..."

--Here in vs 47, we see **the centurion** was affected in a **positive way** and came up with the right conclusion—Jesus was a righteous man!

--And in vs 48, it seems **the crowd** was having a change of heart regarding what they are seeing. **Why** do I say that? Because the verse goes on to say that they "smote their breasts, and returned." The only other time we see someone hitting himself in the chest is in Luke 18:13. In that account, we read of a **humble and repentant** publican who "smote upon his breast, saying, 'God be merciful to me a sinner.'"

But **why were they** hitting themselves in the chest? Could it be that they were beginning to regret their involvement in what had taken place? Were they part of the crowd that yelled, "Crucify Him; crucify Him!"—but were now questioning "why"?

Jesus was a young man...and an innocent man...and no one could truly point to Him ever doing anything wrong. Maybe they had heard Pilate say, "I find no fault in Him." Or maybe they heard the thief on the cross say, "...we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man [Jesus] hath done nothing amiss" (vs 41). And the reality was that Jesus had not done **anything personally harmful** or hateful **to them**. It very much seems like they returned home, humbled and saddened by what they had done instead of having the celebratory joy that usually accompanied the Passover season.

Lastly, let's consider... **4. The unknown spectacularity of what they beheld**

What was so **spectacular**—so amazing—about what they had just witnessed? What is it that **they beheld** that they **did not know** they were beholding? What is it that **their eyes saw** that **their mind did not comprehend**?

More importantly, what happened that day that God **wants us to know**? Three things:

A. God died!

Let that sink in—the people that watched Jesus take His last breath **saw God die!** ‘Wait a minute, Pastor! **Jesus** died on the cross—not God!’ To which I reply, ‘Jesus was no ordinary man—He was God in the flesh!’

I've said this before—and you will probably hear me say it again—but it is important we get our theology straight on this. There is **One** God—and **only One** God! But because God is so infinitely great and beyond our comprehension, He explains—and reveals Himself—to us as One God in **three persons**: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. So the cross was **not** God **the Father**—as “the Boss”—sending God **the Son**—as the “second in command”—to come to earth to die while God the Spirit—the “unseen cheerleader”—looks on from Heaven!

Instead, it was **God Himself coming to earth** as the man Jesus—and **God Himself dying** on a cross! Does **the Bible** really teach that? Yes, it does!

--John 1:1, 14 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ¹⁴ And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten [one of a kind] of the Father,) full of grace and truth.”

--John 14:8-9 “Philip saith unto Him, Lord, show us the Father, and it sufficeth us. ⁹ Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? **he that hath seen me hath seen the Father**; and how sayest thou then, Show us the Father?”

--I Corinthians 5:19 “To wit, that **God was in Christ**, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.”

--I Tim 3:16a “And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: **God was manifest in the flesh...**”

So on the surface, what seems like the **greatest travesty** in human history—a perfectly innocent “man” dying on a cross, seemingly forsaken by God—is actually a demonstration of the **greatest act of love: God the Creator dying for the sins of those He created!**

The chorus of the song that was played for today's Offertory captures the thought well: “*O can it be—upon a tree—the Savior died for me? My soul is thrilled; my heart is filled... to think, He died, for me!*”

B. God was satisfied

Based on the truth we just looked at, it should be no surprise to learn that God was satisfied with the payment He Himself made! But to make sure we “get it,” God **tells us** He was satisfied. Notice the vss on your outline:

--Isaiah 53:10 “Yet it **pleased the LORD** to bruise Him...”

--Isaiah 53:11 “He shall see of the travail of His soul, and **shall be satisfied**: by His knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for He shall bear their iniquities.”

God doesn't just tell us He was satisfied, though—He **showed** it! **How?** By **tearing the veil** of the temple in two! The barrier that had stopped sinful man from coming into the presence of God was now gone!

--Hebrews 10:19-20 “Having therefore, brethren, boldness to **enter into the holiest** by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which He hath consecrated for us, through **the veil**, that is to say, **His flesh**;”

Simply put, sinful man could now come **into the presence** of a holy God without a human mediator because Jesus was the new, once-and-for all Mediator! I Timothy 2:5-6 “For there is **one God**, and **one mediator** between God and men, **the man Christ Jesus**; Who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.”

And because God died—and God was satisfied—we also learn from the cross this important truth:

C. Man can be justified

What does that mean? It means that God can consider us “just as if I'd” never sinned—and allow us into heaven after we die! **But how?**

--By faith! **Romans 3:28** “Therefore we conclude that a man is **justified by faith** without the deeds of the law.”

--By faith *in what?* By faith in our *baptism?* No; that is a *deed* of the law—a *work* that we do!

--By faith in trying to be a *good person*...and *servicing others*...and *helping the poor* and needy?

No; that is *trying to be justified* by the deeds of the law—which God says can't happen!

Romans 3:20 "Therefore by the deeds of the law **there shall no flesh** [no person] **be justified** in His sight..."

--So what does our faith need to *be in?* Our faith needs to be in the *sacrifice God made* to pay for our sins—the death of Himself!

--The *blood of Jesus*, the Lamb of God, is what pays for our sins!

--I Peter 1:18-19 reminds us that we are not redeemed with silver and gold, "but with the **precious blood of Christ**, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot"

--I John 1:7b "...the **blood of Jesus Christ** His Son cleanseth us from all sin."

--Revelation 1:5b "Unto Him that loved us, and **washed us** from our sins **in His own blood.**"

So what *do you see*—in your mind's eye—when you think about the cross?

--God wants you to see that *He died*...and that He was *satisfied with His death* for the payment of *your* sins!

--But He also wants you to be *justified!* He wants to consider you just as if *you'd never sinned* and make you *His child* now and *welcome you* into heaven after you die!

--But even though God's death was *for all men*, not all men are justified!

--So how do we go from being "not justified" to being justified? In other words, *how do we personally* get *our sins paid for* by Jesus when He died over 2000 years ago?

--We have *an example right here* in Luke 23! Two thieves were crucified with Jesus that day—one on each side of Him. And one of those thieves—literally knocking on death's door—passed from being "not justified" to being "justified!" And we can do the same!

--*First*, we need to admit that we are a sinner—and that we deserve to be punished for our sins. We see that in vs 41—"we receive the due reward of our deeds"

--*Second*, we need to believe that Jesus was sinless—"this man hath done nothing amiss"—and that He was dying for *our sins*, not His own!

--We also need to believe—like this man did—that he couldn't get himself into God's kingdom—but that Jesus could take people with Him! That's why he said to Jesus in vs 42, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom."

--*Third*, we need to *call on Jesus* to forgive us and save us, believing He will do that when we ask Him to.

--And the answer of Jesus is still "...him that cometh to me I will in no wise [way] cast out" (John 6:37) and "...whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Romans 10:13).

Have you done that? If not, that is what God wants you to do—today!

Please stand and turn in your hymnals to Hymn 304 – "Come to the Cross." Notice the chorus:

"Come to the cross upon Calv'ry; Gaze on the scene anew."

I tried to take you there, so to speak.

--Can I encourage you to do two things this week:

1) If you are a child of God, try to think on these 3 things this week: God died, God was satisfied, Man can be justified.

2) If you are *not* a child of God, you need to do what the last line of the chorus says: "Turn from your sin to the Savior—there Jesus waits for you."