

## CROSS PURPOSES

*And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.*

Luke 23:33

There were three crosses on Calvary's hill. Our focus rightly zeroes in on that center cross where the Lamb of God gave his life for the sins of the world. But the Gospel story reminds us that there is an important message in those other crosses as well.

It would be difficult to imagine a more dramatic conversation. Beaten, bloody, writhing in pain and gasping for air, three men facing death and eternity talk to one another. What are their thoughts? Where are their hearts? The first criminal is angry and caustic. Gathering strength for what may be his final words, he cries out to Jesus in cynical unbelief, "*Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!*" (Luke 23:39) On the other side of Jesus is a man whose response to his pain is the polar opposite. His tragic situation, far from making him callous and angry, has made him reflective, humble and prayerful. Rebuking the first criminal he said, "*Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong. Then turning to Jesus, he gasps a final prayer, Remember me when you come into your kingdom.*" (Luke 23:40-42)

Two men suffer identical fates. And yet their responses are so very different! There is a message here for all who struggle with disappointments in life. Whether our pain is the consequence of our own poor choices (as was the case for these two criminals) or whether it is simply (!) the result of tragic circumstances in life, these two other crosses teach us that:

1. **I HAVE A CHOICE.** The two criminals' crosses are an eternal reminder that in my own suffering and pain, I have a decision to make. I can choose to become cynical, caustic and angry or I can allow these circumstances to make me mellow and humble. Will my pain lead me away from God... or to Him? Which will it be? I cannot control all that happens to me, but I can control how I will respond.
2. **I HAVE A COMPANION.** Though the One on that middle cross is innocent and pure, he is suffering the very same fate as the most hardened criminals! Ever since Calvary, no one can look at God and say, "But you don't understand my situation! You have no idea how difficult things are!" God became a man so he could fully experience the human condition. He solved the problem of suffering by suffering!
3. **I HAVE A HOPE.** Jesus' words to the dying thief continue to speak hope to millions who struggle with the afflictions of life; "*Today you will be with me in Paradise.*" (Luke 23:43) In Christ, pain and death do not have the last word! Jesus rose from the dead and thereby transformed all suffering into a door of hope.

Pastor Stan