

WHAT WE LEARN FROM A CROSS! Steps to a New Life:

Luke 9:23-27

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Bethany Church

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I don't know how closely you follow the war coverage. As I check media accounts, I get the feel of a rollercoaster. One day there is the arrival of humanitarian aid, the capture of strategic ground and the celebration of liberated Iraqis. Then there is the crash of a helicopter, a homicide bombing at a check point and anti-American riots in an Arab country. Few doubt that the American-led coalition will achieve its military objectives. At the same time, most know that evil will find ways to claim more victims and perpetuate human suffering whatever military objectives are achieved.

Twenty years ago, psychiatrist M. Scott Peck argued in his best-selling book, *People of the Lie*, that the field of psychology did not adequately understand or explain evil. He turned to the Bible. In the Bible evil is not impersonal. For Jesus evil was no abstraction. The term evil shows up 43 times in the four gospels, and Jesus says a good deal about it. In no way did he see evil as a flaw in human nature. Evil was not abnormal psychology or imperfections in human thinking. It was the effect of an evil one. Now this message is not about evil or its nature. It is about what we can learn from a cross and what steps we can take to experience the new life God offers. What can we learn from a cross?

First, a cross reveals the presence and power of evil. Crucifixion was a form of punishment that was invented thousands of years ago in Iran. The Romans perfected it as a form of human torture. Every part of crucifixion was cleverly designed to inflict pain on the person who slowly died. Crucifixion revealed the ingenuity of human beings in harming one another. Crucifixion was not just execution. It was public torture, and to look upon its victims without pity or sympathy sewed callousness in humanity.

The pictures we see from Iraq, thankfully, are largely sanitized. They insulate us partly from the degradation that is really there. In other words, we don't see the full face of evil. It is too revolting. When I was 11 years old, I was not so fortunate. Returning from church, my family came across the scene of a terrible car accident. I never left our car, but the view of mangled metal and the sounds of the dying and surviving were troubling. Even rolling up the window could not stop the fear in my heart or sickness in my stomach. There was no safe distance from that evil.

The cross of Christ signals that. Jesus walked with God and experienced the goodness and love of God; yet he suffered heinous evil from the very people he served. Jesus' suffering did not put us a safe distance away from evil. Jesus said:

If any of you wants to be my follower, you must put aside your selfish ambition, shoulder your cross daily, and follow me. (Luke 9:23, NLT)

There is no safe distance from such pain. A new life on earth is not one safely distant from evil. Instead, Jesus said that if we followed him, we'd not only see pain. We'd experience it. Insulation from evil is not an option. Try as you will, you can not keep yourself or anyone you love a safe distance from evil. Right before his arrest, Jesus told his disciples:

Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world. (John 16:33, NLT)

The new life Jesus brings us does not spare us from trials or sorrow. The gift of new life offers something far more profound and important. The cross reveals that evil's attack is not the same as evil's dominion. Listen to what Jesus told his disciples right before his crucifixion.

I will not speak with you much longer, for the prince of this world is coming. He has no hold on me, but the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me. (John 14:30-31, NIV)

For Jesus "prince of this world" did not mean King Herod, Caiaphas the priest, or the emperor of Rome. He was speaking of "the evil one," the devil. Many translators believe that the most faithful English translation of the Lord's Prayer would not read, "Deliver us from evil," but "deliver us from the evil one." Because the evil one, in his domination of the world, was coming, Jesus' disciples would not hear him much longer. However, the devil's dominion had no hold on Jesus. It would not dominate his destiny or grip him in any manner. Instead, people would learn of Jesus' love, trust and obedience. The devil's attack would not fulfill the devil's purpose. Instead, tremendous good would spring forth.

A cross reveals the devil's domination and destruction. Yet the cross of Christ also reveals God's love and passion for us. In the cross of Christ, the sin of humanity was judged. Its penalty was diverted to a lamb that God sent, so that the hold of evil, its charge, conviction and consequence for us was removed.

For a long time, criminal charges hung over baseball star Kirby Puckett. It put his life on hold. I'm not sure what that's like, but people who have gone through such challenges tell me it affects every part of their lives. It affects their relationships to family and friends, their ability to provide in a job, and any plans for the future. When Puckett was acquitted Thursday, his relief was visible. He got his life back. He was no longer held hostage by the allegations or the consequences they would bring.

The cross for Jesus was not merely an attack of evil. Through his obedience to his heavenly father, it became his attack on evil. The cross did not make him cower in fear. It did not paralyze him, nor direct him to lie, fight or run. Instead, through his faith and obedience He disarmed its power to hold us who trust him. Now, through faith in him, we are freed from evil's power over our future, evil's power over our thinking, the evil one's power over our feelings, and his power over our lives. When we put our trust in Jesus, we still face attacks of the evil one. However, as we trust Christ and take up our cross like he did, we no longer serve as pawns of the evil one; instead we destroy Satan's work and his grip on this earth. We taste the kingdom of God as God displaces evil's power over humanity.

Our situation is much like Mohammed, a 32-year-old Iraqi lawyer who, like it or not, is caught in the war. He could be a pawn of evil by tolerating the torture of 19 year-old, POW Jessica Lynch, or he could do something at great risk. He did not have the luxury of neutrality. He had to choose. He walked six miles to find U.S. Marines, six miles back to get information and then six miles again to share that information with them. He attacked evil. We also are in a war. There is no neutrality. If you want to preserve your life in the short term, you will lose it. Through faith in Christ, you don't leave the war. You change sides. Instead of serving the powers of crucifixion, you serve the work of redemption. Evil no longer has a hold on you. It does not dominate your future or life. Instead, you destroy its hold in the world.

We take steps to a new life when we recognize the evil the cross exposes, the love it heralds and the choice it offers. Do you see the evil that grips the world? Do you see the love that God has for you? Do you recognize the choice you have? Will Jesus be your hope? He is the only alternative to the evil that kills, steals and destroys. Will you respond to his invitation to you? Will you call to him, invite him and welcome him into your life as Lord and Savior?