

INTRODUCTION

Jesus' death leaves us thinking about those he left behind.

JESUS' FRIENDS

The apostles ran away when Jesus was arrested. They abandoned him at the time of his greatest need. Days later they did not believe the reports that he had risen from the dead. The fact that he took them into his confidence again shows his wonderful love and pity.

The only apostle who is recorded as staying by the cross is John. He was an eyewitness of what took place. That is an evidence of God's love to us for our faith is only valid if it is based on evidence - we have good reason for what we believe (see also 2 Peter 1:16-21).

Some of the women who followed Jesus remained with him. They took note of where he was buried and made preparations to embalm the body. They honoured Jesus, and he honoured them by making them the first witnesses of his resurrection. God pays no attention to human ideas about importance.

JESUS' ENEMIES

His enemies' hostility did not cease when he was dead. When they asked for the bodies to be removed they referred to him as "that deceiver". When his grave was found empty they paid the guards to lie about it. Then they persecuted his followers. They were not satisfied with his blood. They claimed that God, not Caesar, was their king. Yet they had to ask Pilate's permission to have the bodies removed. They had rejected the freedom God gives his people and found themselves slaves to God's law and to a foreign power. If we think that freedom comes by rejecting God we will find ourselves in greater slavery.

A HEATHEN SOLDIER

One of the people at the cross was a Roman centurion. When he saw all that happened he declared "This was a righteous man ... the Son of God."

God makes sure the truth is stated even if his own people are silent. Jesus said the very stones would cry out.

It is also typical of God's work that he would take someone who had tortured Jesus and transform him into a friend of Jesus.

It is worth noting that the centurions had acted in ignorance whereas the Scribes had known Jesus and deliberately rejected him. The Apostle Paul said, "I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief."

Nevertheless it was an outstanding act of divine mercy to bring this man to a point where he would confess Christ.

GOD HIS FATHER

The other party at the cross was God the Father. We see his presence in three supernatural events and in the fulfilment of his Word.

At the time of Jesus' death the Temple veil tore in two exposing the 'Most Holy Place' that represented God's presence. For centuries the only access had been by the High Priest annually with a sacrifice for the sins of the people. The removal of this barrier showed that Jesus' death gives us all access to God personally at any time. It was a declaration by God that the old order had passed and that Christ brings us a new spiritual freedom.

The second phenomenon was an earthquake. Its significance is the connection of this natural event with supernatural ones that were obviously symbolic. In the Old Testament God said he would "shake heaven and earth" an illustration of the comprehensive change that would take place with Messiah's coming. The earthquake was symbolic of that. It also reminds us of Jesus' words as he entered Jerusalem to the praise of the people, "If these should hold their peace the very stones would cry out." When his enemies crucified him God made the natural creation acknowledge him.

One result was that some graves opened. After Jesus rose from the dead some of God's people also returned to life and were seen by people living in Jerusalem. This is evidence of Jesus' conquest of death and symbolic of the future redirection. We might expect such great matters to be represented by spectacular events but does not measure things the way we do - witness the birth of Christ.

Strange phenomena are not the only or main evidence of the Father's involvement. His Word was being fulfilled. The ritual of sacrifices must have been temporary for its constant repetition showed it had not put sin away; but God had promised that, so the Saviour's work made that system redundant. Jesus' bonds were not broken unlike the case of those crucified with him. That corresponded to the way the Passover Lamb was handled (that very weekend – Exodus 12:46). It also corresponded to the prediction of Psalm 34:20 (see John 19:36). Both Psalm 22:16 and Zechariah 12:10 allude to the act of crucifixion - "They pierced my hands and feet"; "They shall look on me whom they have pierced..." Our faith is based on what God has said as well as the events themselves.