

Three Symbols

Introduction. Symbols are powerful means of communication in our culture. The American flag, for example, communicates freedom, patriotism, honor, valor, courage, and our power and purpose as a country. Symbols in similar manner identify a sports team, a political party, a fast food restaurant, or an athletic shoe.

In the Bible there are symbols that speak to us in a unique way, especially regarding Jesus. We studied in our recent Vacation Bible School about how Jesus was “Immanuel,” “the light of the world,” “the lamb of God,” “man of sorrows,” and “the Prince of Peace.” These lessons filled our hearts with faith, and to remind our hearts of the events of that special weekend 2,000 years ago, three symbols relating to Christ and Christians will be studied: the cup, cross, and crown.

I. The Cup He Drank

- A. Jesus spoke metaphorically of a cup that He was going to drink. He told the apostles they would not be able to drink of it (Matthew 20:22-23). The cup is often identified with suffering (Psalm 11:6; Isaiah 51:17; Ezekiel 23:33).
- B. In Gethsemane, He fervently prayed for the cup to be removed (Luke 22:42). It was no easy task to which Jesus looked forward, but His prayer centers on the Father’s will (rather than on His being spared). This scene is one of intense emotional strain, and Luke 22:44 describes the emotional agony and mental anguish He underwent in the garden (cp. Hebrews 5:7-9). While He did it alone, He was not alone for the Father was with Him. Only Luke 22:43 mentions that an angel appeared to strengthen Him (cp. Matthew 4:11).
- C. On that fateful Friday, Jesus drank the bitter cup for you and me. His suffering became a pattern for us to suffer for the sake of righteousness (Matthew 5:10-12; 1 Peter 2:18-25; 4:15-16).

II. The Cross He Bore

- A. Scripture says Jesus was tortured by Roman scourging prior to the cross, a practice so barbaric and excruciating that many died (Matthew 27:26; Mark 15:15; John 19:1). Following this Jesus bore the cross to Calvary’s hill. It was customary for the condemned man to carry his own cross from the flogging post to the site of the crucifixion outside the city walls. Since the weight of the entire cross was probably well over 300 pounds, only the crossbar was carried. The patibulum, weighing 75 to 125 pounds was placed across the nape of the victim’s neck and balanced along both shoulders. Jesus could not even bear the weight of the cross, so they had to compel Simon the Cyrene to carry it for Him (Matthew 27:32).
- B. The processional to the site of the crucifixion was led by a complete Roman military guard, headed by a centurion. One of the soldiers carried a sign (titulus) on which the condemned man’s name and crime were displayed. Later, the titulus would be attached to the top of the cross (Matthew 27:37; Luke 23:38; John 19:20). The heavy upright wooden stipes, on which the patibulum would be secured, were permanently located outside the city walls (Hebrews 13:13). There He suffered the anguish, shame, and humiliation of the cross.

- C. Although the Romans did not invent crucifixion, they perfected it as a form of torture and capital punishment that was designed to produce a slow death with maximum pain and suffering. It was one of the most disgraceful and cruel methods of execution and usually was reserved only for slaves, foreigners, revolutionaries and the vilest of criminals.
- D. On the cross, Jesus is offered wine mixed with myrrh, a mild analgesic mixture. He refuses to drink (Matthew 27:34; Mark 15:23). Simon is ordered to place the cross on the ground and Jesus is thrown backward with His shoulders against the wood. The soldier feels for the depression at the front of the wrist. He drives a heavy, square, wrought-iron nail through the wrist and deep into the wood. He then moves to the other side and repeats the action, being careful not to pull the arms too tightly but to allow some flexibility and movement. The cross is then lifted into place. The left foot is pressed backward against the right foot, and with both feet extended, toes down, a nail is driven through the arch of each, leaving the knees moderately flexed. As He slowly sags down with more weight on the nails in the wrists, excruciating, fiery pain shoots along the fingers and up the arms. As He pushes Himself upward to avoid this stretching there is the searing agony of the nail tearing through the nerves between the bones of the feet.
- E. As the arms fatigue, great waves of cramps sweep over the muscles, knotting them in deep, relentless, throbbing pain. With these cramps come the inability to push Himself upward. Hanging by His arms, His muscles become paralyzed. Air can be drawn into the lungs, but cannot be exhaled. Jesus fights to raise Himself in order to get even one short breath. Finally, carbon dioxide builds up in the lungs and in the bloodstream and the cramps partially subside. Spasmodically, He is able to push Himself upward to exhale and bring in the life-giving oxygen.
- F. The length of this agony was inversely related to the severity of the scourging, but death was rarely seen before 36 hours had passed. The weakness of Jesus after His scourging is the likely explanation of His relatively quick death, which was astonishing to Pilate (Mark 15:44). Hours of this limitless pain, cycles of twisting, joint-rending cramps, and searing pain as tissue is torn from His lacerated back as He moves up and down against the rough timber continues. Jesus must then bear another agony, a deep, crushing pain in His chest as the pericardium slowly fills with serum and begins to compress the heart.
- G. It is now almost over — the loss of tissue fluids has reached a critical level as His compressed heart is struggling to pump blood into the tissues. The lungs are making a frantic effort to draw in small gulps of air. After He said, “I thirst,” sponge is soaked in sour wine and is lifted to His lips. He apparently does not take any of the liquid (John 19:29). The body of Jesus is now pushed beyond the point of endurance, and He can feel the chill of death creeping through His tissues. Christ’s mission of atonement has been completed (John 19:30). With one last surge of strength, He presses His torn feet against the nail, straightens His legs, takes a deep breath, and utters His last cry: “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). As a soldier pierced His side (John 19:34-35), the flow of blood and water was evidence of His death and that He is fully human. To confirm this fact was of special importance in the time of John, as the

reality of the death of Jesus was denied by the Gnostics, many of whom maintained that He died in appearance only.

III. The Crown He Wore

- A. The cup and the cross were Friday's symbols of man's sin, God's plan, and Jesus' love. But then came Sunday and up from the grave He arose (Matthew 28:1; Luke 24:1; Acts 2:24-28)!
- B. In that magnificent moment He exchanged the crown of thorns for the crown of glory given by God (1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 19:16).
- C. The Hebrew writer said that His triumph over the grave "crowned him with glory and honor" (Hebrews 1:3; 2:9, 14-15).

Conclusion. Our society worships the weekend. But what a difference a weekend can make! There was one that made the difference far more than any other.

We are not exempt from drinking the bitter cup. It will not be the same as His, but we will drink. We have not been promised a life of ease, free of pain and problems. But it is in the cross that we find strength, help, and hope. In it we learn to love as He loved. We learn self-sacrifice like He gave. We learn the paradox that through dying with Him, we can live with Him and for Him. The cross becomes a symbol for everything that the New Testament means to us: forgiveness, reconciliation, and salvation. And what is the purpose? The Bible says when we endure we will "receive the crown of life," also called a "crown of glory" or "crown of righteousness" (2 Timothy 4:8; James 1:12; 1 Peter 5:4; Revelation 2:10). It is an "incorruptible crown" (1 Corinthians 9:25) — a heavenly crown!

It is through the contemplation of these facts that the Lord's Supper and even everyday life becomes even more significant and special to a Christian.

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