Three stops on the Saviour's path to his atoning death

"When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus forth, and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called the Pavement, but in the Hebrew, Gabbatha. . . . . And he bearing his cross went forth into a place called the place of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha . . . . Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews' preparation day; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand," John 19:13, 17, 41-42.

When I read this chapter a few days ago, I was carried back to my first year as a Christian. I sat in old Ravenhill Free Presbyterian Church in a meeting at which the late Pastor Willie Mullan was preaching. He took us to this chapter and dealt with its contents in a most innovative and thrilling manner. I have never forgotten the gist of what he said.

It came back to me as I read the chapter and I happily put down these thoughts, which doubtlessly owe a lot to what I heard back then, some 57 years ago!

This chapter contains references to three specific places related to that dreadful time of the Saviour's rejection by Israel and His crucifixion by the Romans and His burial by two faithful believers. I have highlighted the places in my texts above. They are Gabbatha, Golgotha and a Garden!

I. GABBATHA WAS THE PLACE WHERE PILATE DELIVERED HIS DECISION REGARDING CHRIST.

1. It is noteworthy what it was moved Pilate to deliver Christ unto death. "When Pilate therefore heard that saying . . . Then delivered he him therefore unto them to be crucified," verses 13, 16.

The 'saying' which moved Pilate to act as he did is recorded for us in verse 12. "And from thenceforth Pilate sought to release him: but the Jews cried out, saying, If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend: whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar."

2. It was a saying loaded with political insinuation and sinister innuendo. Pilate recognised the implications in that simple statement. To show any favour toward the Lord Jesus, given His claim to be the KING of Israel, was politically dangerous. He had plainly stated His claim to kingship in John 18:37. "Pilate therefore said unto him, Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice." That little phrase 'thou sayest' is to be understood as an affirmation in the same way as we would say here in Ulster, 'you have said it' when we confirm a statement made to us as being true.

The Caesar in that day was Tiberius. He died in AD 37, a short time after the Saviour's crucifixion. During Tiberius' reign Jews had become more prominent in Rome and Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus began proselytising Roman citizens, increasing long-simmering resentments. Tiberius in 19 AD ordered Jews who were of military age to join the Roman Army. Tiberius banished the rest of the Jews from Rome and threatened to enslave them for life if they did not leave the city. (Wikipedia).

He was of a morose, gloomy disposition and it can be well understood that Pilate felt he could not risk upsetting him for that would bring dire consequences for his career. Therefore when the Jewish leaders dropped that ominous hint about 'not being friend of Caesar', Pilate acted to safeguard his political career.

Nothing really changes over the years!

3. Pilate, like so many before and after him, sacrificed his soul's salvation for the sake of the expediency of the moment. Oh how wrong he was! Better it would have been to side with the Lord Jesus and stand up for what he really knew was true about Him. He had repeatedly indicated that he believed that the Lord Jesus was innocent of any crime, as falsely alleged by the Jews. "I find in him no fault at all (18:38);

and indeed how should he? there was no sin in his nature, nor guile in his lips, nor any iniquity in his life; the devil himself could find none in him. This confession is both to the shame of Pilate and the Jews; to the reproach of Pilate, that after this he should condemn him; and of the Jews, that after such a fair and full declaration from the judge, they should insist upon his crucifixion; it shows, however, that he died not for any sin of his own, but for the sins of others," Dr John Gill.

Furthermore, Peter said, "The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, hath glorified his Son Jesus; whom ye delivered up, and denied him in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let him go," Acts 3:13. Paul tells us, "I give thee charge in the sight of God, who quickeneth all things, and before Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate witnessed a good confession," 1 Timothy 6:13.

What a privilege Pilate enjoyed! He was presented with the gospel in the words of the Saviour's 'witness'. The word there means, 'to testify', and the words ' good confession' means 'a clear and beautiful setting forth' of the gospel.

Yet, despite this, Pilate turned his back on Christ, denying what he felt in his heart and which was confirmed to him by the words and demeanour of the Lord Jesus.

How many in like manner place their hopes of earthly honour and prosperity before the eternal welfare of their souls and are lost in hell for ever as a consequence!

II. GOLGOTHA WAS THE PLACE WHERE THE LORD JESUS DIED AN ATONING DEATH FOR HIS ELECT.

"And he bearing his cross went forth into a place called the place of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha: Where they crucified him, and two other with him, on either side one, and Jesus in the midst," 19:17-18.

1. The word 'Golgotha' means, as it is stated, the place of a skull. For Bible believers, the location is that which since the 19th century has been called 'Gordon's Calvary'. General Gordon was one foremost in contending that the place he believed was 'Golgotha' was the true Calvary in opposition to the mythical 'Calvary' set forth by Roman Catholicism.

General Gordon wrote: "I feel, for myself, convinced that the Hill near the Damascus Gate is Golgotha. ... From it, you can see the Temple, the Mount of Olives and the bulk of Jerusalem. His stretched out arms would, as it were, embrace it: 'all day long have I stretched out my arms,' Isaiah 65:2. Close to it is the slaughter-house of Jerusalem; quite pools of blood are lying there. It is covered with tombs of Muslims;

The 'skull-like' rock formation that is Calvary's hill, photographed by me on a memorable visit to Israel in 2010.

there are many rock-hewn caves; and gardens surround it. Now, the place of execution in our Lord's time must have been, and continued to be, an unclean place ... so, to me, this hill is left bare ever since it was first used as a place of execution. ... It is very nice to see it so plain and simple, instead of having a huge church built on it." (Letters of General C. G. Gordon to his sister M. A. Gordon).

Only the 'few' Bible believers view this location as the true 'Calvary'! The multitudes flock to Rome's ornamented and idolatrously adorned 'tomb' within the wall of Jerusalem.

Rome's idolatrous supposed 'Calvary' where there is no likeness of the rocky, 'place of the skull' !

We are especially told in God's Word that the Lord Jesus was crucified 'outside' the city walls. "Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate," Hebrews 13:12.

This is but another example of Rome's frauds!

2. Where Christ was crucified was considered a place of reproach. As Hebrews 13:13 states, those who associated themselves with Christ entered upon a place of reproach. "Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach." This is why so many believers today shun separation from the apostate, ecumenical denominations and choose rather to stay in! Those who separate immediately suffer reproach from family members, friends and acquaintances and business associates. I in my life time have seen the impact of this upon many. There is a price to be paid when you stand with Christ. "Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God," John 12:42-43.

Those who share in this cowardly view of things should bear in mind what the Saviour said in Luke chapter 9. So often this sinful choice is made, as in the case with Pilate, in order to preserve one's earthly standing amongst men. "And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it. For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, or be cast away? For whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he shall come in his own glory, and in his Father's, and of the holy angels," verse 23-26.

Oh how much wiser would our thinking be if only we would keep a view of that day ever before us!

3. The gospel of the Lord Jesus has ever been considered a matter of reproach and that will increase in these last days! In the past, the gospel was afforded a measure of general respect though men in the secrecy of their hearts despised it. I recall in my unsaved days, while I would never publicly speak a word against the gospel, yet I inwardly held it in contempt. Today, what was hidden and concealed in the hearts of men, is openly declared and that without the least shame!

We in times like that spoken of by Paul in Titus 1:6, when many who would call themselves Christians are in truth nothing more than those who "profess that they know God; but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate."

As I say it will become worse. The price of standing with Christ and for Christ is going to become much more costly! "And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for

the word of God, and for the testimony which they held:

And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?

And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled," Revelation 6:9-11.

This scene is just before the return of Christ as verses 12-17 of that same chapter indicates.

Yes, the days are going to get worse and the cost of faithfulness higher.

III. THE GARDEN WAS A PLACE WHERE MEN, BY THE GRACE OF GOD, SHOWED TRUE COURAGE AND FAITHFULNESS.

View of the entrance to the Saviour's tomb in the Garden.

"Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews' preparation day; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand," John 19:41-42.

1. At Gabbatha and Golgotha scenes of man's depraved wickedness were witnessed, but at the Garden, the wonderful grace of God in the life of poor weak sinners was seen.

Joseph of Arimathaea is one of two men who manifested courage and grace as disciples in a time of great threat and hatred toward believers. It was so intense a time of opposition that all of the disciples had fled and kept their distance although they did seem to draw near to the cross in the Saviour's final minutes before His death. John the apostle was amongst those women of whom it is said: "Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son!" John 19:25-27. I am sure that the other apostles were there as well. Peter said in Acts 3:14-15. "But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; and killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses." These words would indicate that the apostles had witnessed the terrible denial and crucifixion of the Saviour.

2. In the light of the atmosphere of fear it is all the more remarkable that we read of wonderful Christian boldness on that day. "And after this Joseph of Arimathaea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus," John 19:38.

The Garden was the scene of the Saviour's resurrection in power. The Saviour was "declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead," Romans 1:4. It is by that power we as believers live in victory over the world and sin and the flesh. That power was now seen in transforming triumph in the lives of two men who before had lived in a cowering fashion, fearful to openly own the Lord Jesus.

Joseph had been reluctant to own Christ because of a 'fear of the Jews', but by the grace of God he was able to gain the victory and openly and boldly claim the body of Christ from Pilate.

Both Joseph and Nicodemus joined in this valiant venture of honouring the Lord. They had for a time been snared by fear. Nicodemus, so often described as (he that came to Jesus by night), John 7:50. But now he had come out of doubt and darkness into the full light of spiritual understanding and boldly stood for the

Lord Jesus with Joseph in the hour of the Saviour's supreme reproach. "And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight. Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews' preparation day; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand," John 19:39-42.

Joseph donated a tomb and Nicodemus gifted myrrh and aloes. Both gifts were of substantial value. The Lord honoured these men by recording their deeds for all to read and how many hundreds of millions have read the gospel accounts of their bravery since the times when the gospel records first began to circulate! They have been read with admiration and with praise to God Who giveth such grace to men!

3. The grace bestowed in the garden is still available unto us poor sinners. "But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded. Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up," James 4:6-10.

The Lord resists pride but enables the humble to resist the devil and cause him to flee. Surely that is the grace needed in these evil times!

Please note the simple steps. Submission, Draw nigh to God, cleansing of our hands, purifying of our hearts, humbling ourselves with mourning heaviness over our sinfulness and frivolity and we will be lifted up!

Is that not what the people of God need today and for which a remnant are seeking!

Let us apply these simple steps, steps that once were repeatedly set forth in the old conventions and conferences and missions of by gone days, and victory, as promised by the Lord, shall be ours!

God shall 'lift us up'! That means He will 'exalt us high' from where we have fallen through our worldliness and backsliding.

The wonderful transformation enjoyed by Jospeh and Nicodemus in the dark and backsliding hour of the of the disciples at the crucifixion, may be ours today in this hour in which the same rebellious spirit is abroad amongst our nation as was in that day in Israel.

May the Lord grant us a portion of that wonderful grace today.

Rev Ivan Foster.

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