

'Down from the cross'.

My Bible text comes from Matthew 27: 'Those who passed by derided Him, wagging their heads and saying, '... If you are the Son of God, *come down from the cross*'.¹

1. 'Things which Jesus did' and things which Jesus didn't do.

I hardly need to tell you that the Gospels of the New Testament have a great deal to tell us of the 'things which Jesus *did*.'

Those words are lifted from the very last verse of the Gospel according to John: 'There are also many other *things which Jesus did*. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written'.²

And, on account of the way in which the New Testament is constructed, the very next book, Luke's 'Acts of the Apostles', opens with the words, 'The former treatise I made, O Theophilus, (referring, of course, to the Gospel according to Luke) concerning *all that Jesus began* both *to do* and to teach'.³

So that, if we ever read through the New Testament consecutively, we will find these two references to our Lord's deeds ('things which Jesus *did*' and 'all that Jesus began ... *to do*') standing directly alongside each other!

But the New Testament testifies not only to the *quantity*, but to (i) the *nature* and (ii) the *quality* of all that He did.

The apostle Peter once summarised the *nature* of our Lord's deeds when he told Cornelius and his household that 'Jesus of Nazareth ... went about ('passed through') doing *good*'.⁴

For his part, Mark reported the verdict of the crowd on the *quality* of what the Lord Jesus did (following His healing of a deaf man with a speech impediment from Decapolis), 'He has done all things *well*'.⁵

In summary, therefore, the Lord Jesus not only *did 'good'*, but He *did it 'well'*.

And, given the wealth of material to be found in the Gospels, we naturally tend to concentrate on the many things which our Lord *did*. But we would be remiss indeed if we failed to note also the way in which the New Testament has much to tell us also of things which He *didn't do*.

If, for example, we confined ourselves to just one instance each, taken from several key writers of the New Testament, we would find that, while He was here in the world, our Saviour:

- (i) *did not* authorise two of His disciples, when they asked, to call down fire from heaven to consume a Samaritan village which had refused to receive Him;⁶
- (ii) *did not* lose any of those given to Him by the Father;⁷
- (iii) *did not* 'please Himself';⁸
- (iv) *did not* glorify 'Himself to be made a high priest', being appointed to that office by God Himself;⁹ and
- (v) *did not* sin.¹⁰

Thank you, Luke, John, Paul, Peter and the writer to the Hebrews.

In the context of our Lord's passion alone, and again by way of example only, we would discover that He:

- (i) *did not* insist on His own will;¹¹
- (ii) *did not* request angelic help;¹²
- (iii) *did not* hide His face from shame and spitting;¹³
- (iv) *did not* speak out in His own defence;¹⁴ and
- (v) *did not* revile and threaten those who were responsible, humanly speaking, for His sufferings.¹⁵

(ii) 'Come down'.

But, at this time, I want us to focus particularly on the fact that *the Lord Jesus did not* (in the words of 'those who passed by' the scene of His crucifixion) '*come down from the cross*'.

Oh, yes, most certainly, as we know well, some thirty-three years before, He had, in an entirely different sense, '*come down*'!

We have only to think, for example, of His oft-quoted words in John 6, 'I *came down* from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of Him that sent me'.¹⁶ Indeed, I note that in His discourse in that very chapter, He claimed no less than seven times that He (the true and the living 'bread') had come down 'from heaven'.¹⁷

Not that His incarnation was the first time when He (God manifest in the flesh¹⁸) had 'come down'. Not by a long way! I think in particular of the words which He (the great 'I am'¹⁹) had spoken to Moses at the Bush,²⁰ prior to Israel's Exodus from Egypt, 'I have surely seen the affliction of my people ... and have heard their cry ... I know their sufferings, and *I have come down* to deliver them'.²¹

Oh yes, the Lord Jesus had willingly *come down from His heaven*, but He would **not** *come down from His cross*.²²

(iii) Neither 'come down' nor 'cast down'.

I cannot help wondering whether, in the challenge issued by 'those who passed by' ('*If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross*'), the Saviour heard an echo of another voice. For something over three years before, He had heard a far more sinister voice speaking to Him, not (as now) on a cross at Golgotha, but (then) on the pinnacle of the nearby Temple: '*If you are the Son of God, cast yourself down*'.²³

But Jesus wouldn't 'come down' from the cross now, any more than He would 'tempt God' by *throwing Himself down* from the high point of the Temple complex then.

(iv) The rulers wade in.

When reading the Gospel accounts, we discover that the Jewish rulers were very quick to jump on the bandwagon, and to add their weight to the challenge issued by the passers-by. 'The chief priests, with the scribes and elders', we read, 'mocked Him, saying, 'He is the King of Israel [with the unspoken insinuation, 'who are you kidding!']; *let Him come down now from the cross*, and we will believe in Him'.²⁴

In other words, they were saying (as so often before), 'Let Him give us a spectacular, miraculous sign to arouse and to quicken our faith!' But, as we know so well, the *only miraculous sign* which our Lord was to give was *not* His *coming down from the cross*, but His *coming up from the grave*.²⁵

Oh yes, the Saviour's resurrection was the only spectacular sign which He promised to give in support of His claims. We read that, when He cleansed the Temple of the salesmen there at the beginning of His public ministry, the Jews demanded, 'What sign do you show us for doing these things?' To which Jesus answered, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up', speaking, the Gospel writer explained, 'about the temple of His body'.²⁶

When later 'some of the scribes and Pharisees' said, 'Teacher, we desire to see a sign from you', He answered them, 'No sign will be given to' this generation 'except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth'.²⁷

As the apostle Paul told the saints in Rome, the Lord Jesus was 'declared to be the Son of God ... by His resurrection from the dead'.²⁸

Truly then, as I said, the *only* spectacular sign which our Lord was to give was *not* His *coming down from the cross*, but His *coming up from the grave*.

Of course, when the passers-by and the Jewish leaders challenged Jesus to 'come down from the cross', none of them believed for one moment that He *could* have 'come down'.

But *He* knew what nobody else there knew, that, in one sense at least,²⁹ just as He could earlier have summoned in excess of twelve legions of angels to His aid *in Gethsemane*,³⁰ so He could have done the very thing for which they called *at Golgotha* ... that He *could* have torn out the nails from His hands and feet and have come down from His cross.

But no! He would *not* come down, either (i) for 'those who passed by', or (ii) for the Jewish rulers – indeed, not for any. And so it was that He who had earlier refused to *alleviate* His suffering by '*drinking down*' some proffered drugged wine,³¹ now refused to *avoid* His suffering altogether by '*coming down*' from His cross.

(v) Elijah's services not required and Elijah's example not followed.

We read that 'some of them that stood by' mistook one of our Lord's cries from the cross to be His calling out for Elijah,³² following which one of the soldiers³³ said, 'Let us see whether Elijah will come to take Him down'.³⁴ But, no, the Saviour was not calling out for Elijah 'to take Him down' from the cross, any more than He intended to 'come down' Himself.

But, speaking of Elijah, I recall the two occasions when Ahaziah, king of Israel, sent companies of fifty men to arrest him, and when both of those companies demanded that the prophet 'come down'³⁵ from the top of the hill where he was then sitting.

But Elijah did not 'come down'! Instead, he 'brought down' fire from heaven on both companies, which fire consumed them, captains and all.³⁶

But it is lovely to observe that here at Golgotha, not only did our Lord refuse to 'come down' Himself, but He chose not to 'command fire to come down from heaven, and consume' the two companies who now reviled and mocked Him³⁷ ... which is, of course, exactly what, as we noted before, James and John had earlier suggested that He do to a village of Samaritans which had done no more than refuse to welcome Him.³⁸

(vi) 'I cannot come down'.

As many others believers, I have long enjoyed linking (i) our Lord's refusal to accept the double challenge to 'come down from the cross' with (ii) the refusal of Nehemiah almost 500 years before to accept the invitation issued by his adversaries to meet with them at some distance away from Jerusalem; namely, 'I am doing a great work, and *I cannot come down*'.³⁹

And I have no doubt that our Saviour could have responded truthfully to the challenge now issued by the passers-by and the Jewish rulers by quoting Nehemiah's very words ... 'I am doing a great work and *I cannot come down*!' For He was then engaged in 'a great work' indeed! ... a great work' by which He would secure a 'great salvation'⁴⁰ for great sinners like you and me.

(vii) Down at last.

We know that, within a matter of hours, Joseph of Arimathea, having begged and obtained express permission from Pilate, 'took Him down'.⁴¹ Ah, yes, 'down' from the cross then. But we know that by then our Lord's 'great work' would have been well and truly completed⁴² ... it would then be forever behind Him.⁴³

But now, with His work of redemption not yet accomplished, He was resolute ... He would not 'come down from the cross'.

(viii) For us.

And we all know why it was that He would not 'come down'. In one sense, the Jewish leaders hit the nail on the head when they sneered, 'He saved others; Himself He cannot save'.⁴⁴ For that was the very choice He faced: (i) to come down from the cross and thereby save Himself, or (ii) to remain there that He might save others. Little did any of those who stood there that day know that *it* took more love to keep Him on the cross than it would have taken power to bring Him down from it.

Before leaving the upper room for the Garden of Gethsemane the previous evening, the Lord Jesus had sung a section of the book of the psalms known as 'the Hallel'.⁴⁵ Among the very last words He sang, with reference to the Jewish Passover festival, were 'bind the sacrifice with cords, even unto ('as far as') the horns of the altar'.⁴⁶ But what, we ask (and speaking metaphorically), were the 'cords' which bound our Lord to His cross?

Make no mistake, it was neither the strength of the nails nor the power of Rome which held our Lord there.

Some time ago, I read a short novel, 'The Plague in Bergamo', written by a nineteenth century Danish author.⁴⁷ I don't have time to fill in all the details, but the storyline centred around a plague in the town of Bergamo in Italy. The novel climaxes with a scene in a long-abandoned Cathedral, where an unruly mob led by the local butcher came to ridicule a group of visiting worshippers who had gone there to pray.

The mob 'felt', the writer said, 'satisfaction in knowing that each of their blasphemies was a sting in the hearts' of these pious worshippers. 'Then one from among' the worshippers, he wrote, 'a young monk, rose up and ... preached concerning' God's law, 'that every transgression of which they were guilty would be counted against them'.

'But', our author put into the monk's mouth, 'you will say, "Christ died for our sins" ... But I say to you, hell will not be cheated of a single one of you ... you build upon the cross of Golgotha! Come and look at it!'

Then, having briefly described the actual crucifying of Jesus, the monk continued, 'He on the cross looked down on the soldiers, who were casting lots for His unstitched garment, and on the ... turbulent mob, for whose sake He suffered that they might be saved'.

'Those below ... called out to Him', the monk added, 'If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross'.

'Then', the monk cried, 'He, the only begotten Son of God was filled with anger, and seeing that they were not worthy of salvation He tore His feet free ... clenched His hands round the nails and tore them out ... He leaped down ... and snatched up His garment ..., flung it round His shoulders ... and ascended into heaven'.

'The cross', the monk declared, 'stood empty, and the great work of redemption was never completed. There is', the monk concluded, 'no mediator between God and us; there is *no Jesus who died for us on the cross!*'

'As he uttered these last words', the novel continued, 'a groan of agony went through the church ... in the corners they began to weep. Then the butcher pushed forward ... pale as a corpse, and shouted: "Monk, monk, you must nail Him on the cross again!"'⁴⁸

But you and I know *this* was *all fiction*. And we can thank God that it was!

But think for a moment; what if, as our author imagined the monk claiming, the Saviour *had* based His work of salvation on whether we were worthy of it or not?

What if He had come down from the cross?

Take the time to praise Him today that *He didn't!*

Truly, Katherine A. M. Kelly said it very well for us all:

Was it the nails, O Saviour,
That bound Thee to the tree?
Nay, 'twas Thine everlasting love,
Thy love for me, for me.⁴⁹

Notes

¹ Matt. 27. 40; cf. Mark 15. 30.

² John 21. 25. Cf. 'which He did', John 2. 23; 6. 2.

³ Acts 1. 1.

⁴ Acts 10. 38.

⁵ Mark 7. 37.

⁶ Luke 9. 52-56.

⁷ John 6. 39; 17. 12; 18. 9.

⁸ Rom. 15. 2-3.

⁹ Heb. 5. 4-6.

¹⁰ 1 Pet. 2. 22.

¹¹ Matt. 26. 39, 42.

¹² Matt. 26. 53.

¹³ Isa. 50. 6.

¹⁴ Matt. 27. 14; cf. Isa. 53. 7; John 19. 9.

¹⁵ 1 Pet. 2. 23.

¹⁶ John 6. 38.

¹⁷ John 6. 32, 33, 38, 41, 50, 51, 58.

¹⁸ 1 Tim. 3. 16.

¹⁹ John 8. 58.

²⁰ Cf. Luke 20. 37 (KJV).

²¹ Exod. 3. 7-8; Acts 7. 34. Cf. Gen. 11. 5; Exod. 19. 20; Num. 11. 25; 2 Sam. 22. 10 etc..

²² Which is how it is described, John 19. 17.

²³ Recorded for us, not in Matthew 27, but in Matthew 4, Matt. 4. 6; cf. Luke 4. 9.

²⁴ Matt. 27. 41-42; Mark 15. 31-32..

²⁵ Matt. 12. 38-40; John 2. 18-21; cf. Rom. 1. 4.

²⁶ John 2. 14-22.

²⁷ Matt. 12. 38-40

²⁸ Rom. 1. 4.

²⁹ In terms of God's 'determinate counsel and foreknowledge', Acts 2. 23, the Lord Jesus could not, of course, have come down, for His work was not yet 'finished'.

³⁰ Matt. 26. 53.

³¹ Matt. 27. 34; Mark 15. 23; Luke 23. 36.

³² Mark 15. 35.

³³ Luke 23. 36.

³⁴ Mark 15. 36.

³⁵ In the Greek Old Testament of 2 Kings 1. 9, 11, the writer used the very same word ('καταβαίνω') twice as is now used by both Matthew (27. 40, 42) and Mark (15. 30, 32) twice.

³⁶ 2 Kings 1. 9-12.

³⁷ Matt. 27. 39 ('εβλασφημουν'), 41.

³⁸ Luke 9. 54.

³⁹ Neh. 6. 2-3.

⁴⁰ Heb. 2. 3.

⁴¹ Mark 15. 43-46; cf. Luke 23. 53; Acts 13. 29 (Paul may well have said 'they' because Nicodemus played a part also, John 19. 38-40).

⁴² John 4. 34; 17. 4; 19. 30.

⁴³ Rom. 6. 9.

⁴⁴ Matt. 27. 42; Mark 15. 31.

⁴⁵ Psalms 113-118 'are more distinctively known as the "Hallel of Egypt", as distinguished from Psalm 136, the "Great Hallel"', *The Jewish Encyclopedia*.

See <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=141&letter=H>.

⁴⁶ Psa. 118. 27.

⁴⁷ '*The Plague in Bergamo*', by Jens Peter Jacobsen (1847-1885). Translated from the Danish By Anna Grabow (1921). The full story in English can be downloaded from ... <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/6765>. Needless to say, I read the English translation, or it would have all been Double Dutch to me!

⁴⁸ The story ends quickly, with the monk, who sensed his duty complete, leading the worshippers out of the cathedral, 'singing across the square' and away into a 'sun-lit plain'.

⁴⁹ The hymn, 'Give me a sight, O Saviour'.