

The Crucifixion & Death of Jesus

In our last lesson we considered Judas' betrayal of Jesus, and we were left with the question, "Is Judas saved?" In Matthew 27 he is called a "son of perdition," but in the same chapter he does some things that may possibly look like repentance. Judas says in verse 4, "I have sinned for I have betrayed innocent blood." Then Judas threw the money into the temple, went away, and hanged himself. His hanging is our clue that he is not repentant in a godly way. In 2 Corinthians 7:8-10 Paul writes that he is happy that his first letter caused the Corinthian church to sorrow, because their sorrow led to repentance and therefore was godly sorrow. Godly sorrow leads to repentance and salvation, but worldly sorrow brings death. If Judas' statement, "I have sinned," was an indication of true repentance he would not have killed himself, which is a sign of a curse and a great sin. I am not saying that somebody who commits suicide cannot be saved. I am saying that if consider Judas' suicide in light of what else we know of him—how he repudiated and sold Christ, was entered by Satan, fulfilled the prophecy in Psalm 69 that Jesus would be betrayed by one of His own, the message about him in Acts 1—it is clear that Judas was not sincerely repentant. He was merely grieving over the consequences of his sin.

We also looked at Jesus' trial, and saw that the high priests initially attempted to "catch" Jesus by using false witnesses. Matthew tells us they are false witnesses, but they might not have known they were. Jesus' accusers were concerned to follow the law, which is why they kept calling up one witness after another, rather than just calling two, accepting their questionable testimonies, and proceeding on false charges. The Sanhedrin wanted a valid trial, which is why they finally admitted that calling witnesses was not working and began directly questioning Jesus themselves. Had they stuck with the path of false witnesses, it would have invalidated the trial, and strange as it might seem, they were men who sincerely cared about the law.

As we now turn to the crucifixion of Jesus, our goal is not to look at the pain and sorrow and to wallow in it, but to hear the narrative again, to hear it as the first readers heard it and to see what the Gospels intend. The Gospels do not dwell on the physical sorrows of Christ. They do dwell on His sorrows, but not that kind. They dwell on the words around the cross. One of the chief tasks in biblical interpretation, is to find out how people hear the Bible today, to figure out where that is wrong, and then to offer correction. This is especially important with regard to Jesus' death on the cross, an event that is so familiar and trivialized. We commonly use phrases like, "It is my cross to bear," when speaking of relatively trivial events. Crosses are used to identify buildings as churches. Crosses can even be pretty, turned into jewelry. A Christian who wears a cross is doing so to remind himself of Christ, while others wear one meaninglessly. But we lose the meaning of the cross if it is just a pretty thing. The cross was a terrible thing.

The cross signified shame. It was the strongest, most horrible punishment that the Roman Empire could inflict and was reserved for slaves and worthless revolutionaries. To God's covenant people, the cross signified the curse of God, as said in Deuteronomy and Galatians. It also signified the crowning act of the Jews' rebellion against God—they murdered their Messiah, their Lord, their covenant Mediator, the final Prophet, the Son of God, the Son of Man, the great High Priest, the final sacrifice. Pilate said, "I am innocent of this man's blood," washed his hands and told the Jews it was their responsibility. And the Jews responded with the horrible words, "Let His blood be on us and on our children."

The Gospels' presentation of the cross does not focus on physical events—lashing and the details of His death, though some are mentioned. The main focus is the words during Jesus' trial and crucifixion. The Jews' words, "Let His blood be on us and on our children," is a terrible self imprecatory oath, and yet

their only hope is that His blood would be on them, to cover them. We also have Caiaphas' words, "It is better for one man to die than the whole nation perish." Unknowingly, he was speaking of Christ's atonement. It is certainly also true that the soldiers who clothed Jesus in a scarlet robe and thrust a crown of thorns on Him and said, "Hail, king of Jews," were most definitely telling the truth—Jesus reigns from the cross. Their motives may have been wicked, but what they said is true: He *is* the king of the Jews. When they crucified Him, the charge was put over Him: "This is Jesus, King of the Jews." And the charge is true. Even on the cross, Jesus did precisely what a king does; He defends his people from their adversaries. The great adversary is our own sin and on the cross Jesus defeated our greatest enemy, protecting us from harm. The witnesses did not see it or know it, but it is true. One person has said they were like cows viewing a sunset; cows are not thinking aesthetic thoughts when they see a sunset. The truth was right there but the Jews could not see it.

The mockery and gambling for Jesus' clothes, among other things, had been foretold but the Jews could not see these prophecies coming true. The mockery is cruel and has a certain internal logic—if Jesus was who He says He is, then He would not be on the cross. They think they finally have their vindication because of the custom of the day that a righteous man would never die shamefully, which was actually taught by some of their religious leaders. "If He can save others, let Him save Himself," they said. But it is precisely because He was willing to save others that He could not save Himself. He could not, as they taunted Him, come down from the cross because if He did, He would no longer be saving others. He would no longer be the true and faithful son of God.

When He spoke from the cross, He did not do so to condemn but to interpret His death for us. Probably the most important words are in Matthew 27:46: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This is sometimes called Jesus' cry of dereliction. What is startling about the wording of His cry? What is singular about the way He talks? Jesus always calls God His Father, with one exception, and this is it. What are we to make of that? It indicates there is about to be a change in the relationship.

With this cry Jesus was quoting Psalm 22, so we know we should interpret His death through Psalm 22. Of course, Psalm 22 is laden with statements that predict Jesus' death:

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent. Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel. In you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. They cried to you and were saved; in you they trusted and were not disappointed. But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: 'He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.' I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. [Crucifixion can do that.] My heart has turned to wax; [Heart failure can occur on the cross.] It has melted away within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones; [The bones were laid bare by crucifixion.] People stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing."

Some people say Jesus wants to call attention to this psalm so we can see the prophecy is being fulfilled and also because the psalm ends in a cry of triumph and a mood of joy. However, this interpretation is

lacking. If we make Jesus' cry into a mere quotation of Psalm 22, then we remove the genuineness from His words. On the cross He is really saying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It is a real statement, not just something for didactic purposes. Some people think that Jesus was just emoting—He feels forsaken but God could never really forsake Him. There are Bible verses, after all, in which God says He will never leave you. But Jesus is rightly reporting that He is, indeed, forsaken by the Father. To some extent, we might say this feeling of abandonment is part of His temptation. He is genuinely abandoned, forsaken, and deserted. We must not tame His words.

Why is He forsaken? It is because He who knew no sin was made to be sin (2 Corinthians 5:21). He was forsaken because God's eyes are too pure to look upon evil (Habakkuk 1:13). Christ became a curse for us. There was a real separation here because this was "the great exchange," as it is sometimes called. Jesus bore our sin and gave us His righteousness. He was really bearing our sin, our punishment, and the price of separation from God. This was His descent into hell, as the Apostle's Creed says, "He descended in hell." The essence of hell is separation of God. On the cross, Jesus was separated from God, and this is what His words meant.

The mystery of the cross is how the Trinitarian union could survive such a rupture. We do not want to explain away the mystery and act like it is no longer a theological problem. At the heart of the mystery is the obedience of Christ. A man named Richard Sibbes, a Puritan theologian, said that Jesus was never more obedient, and He never pleased the Father more, than when He uttered those words on the cross. There was not a bit of sin in Jesus' words. He was telling the truth. Jesus rightly said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" so that we would never have to rightly say that. Although He felt the distance, He was also finishing the job that was given to Him. He did not balk at the last few steps of the journey, but took it to the end.

One of the most difficult questions to consider is the reality of the deity and humanity of Christ with regard to His separation from the Father. When you start to probe into that, things start to go wrong. One of the early Christian heresies was dividing the two natures of Christ and making Him two people. The reality, though it is a mystery, is that there is a unity of the divine and human natures in Christ—He is one person. The most one can say is that at times, Jesus' humanity is in the forefront and at other times His deity is in the forefront. They are both always there. When Jesus dies, His humanity is in the forefront because God cannot die. Jesus, bodily, did die. And that is a human consequence of enduring what He had to endure.

How should we understand the second statement of Jesus from the cross: "It is finished"? These words have been explained as "the bill was paid in full," based on the Greek word *tetelestai*. But that word is also used to indicate the discharging of a religious obligation. That use is found in several places, including John 17:4. It is used to say not only "paid in full," but even more prominently, "discharged in full." The job is done. It is finished. In the end, there is no conflict between the "it is paid" and "the job is done" motif. His last statement from the cross shows a change of diction that proves He is finished with hell: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." He is no longer paying for sin, nor bearing God's punishment. What, then, was He doing during the three days after His death? Martin Luther said that Jesus spent three days thumbing His nose at the devil. Indeed, Jesus' work was done when He said, "It is finished." He could then address God as His Father again, and commit His spirit to Him. Jesus' life was not taken from Him, but He gave it up willingly.

Some very interesting things happen after Jesus' death. The veil of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom, there is an earthquake, and people come out of their tombs (Matthew 27:51-53). The tearing of

the curtain that divided the Holy Place from the rest of the temple means that instead of one man entering the Holy of Holies once a year, anybody can now enter; the door is wide open. There is now free access to God. The curtain was torn from top to bottom, which means it is not the act of a human, but of God. The earthquake shows that this is an earth-shattering event. Many people came out of tombs, after Jesus' resurrection (verse 53), and went into the holy city. I take this to mean that after Jesus' resurrection, a number of others were raised to suggest that Jesus' death symbolizes our lives. It is the life of the saints.

We should also consider Jesus' words to the thief on the cross. Jesus tells him, "Today you will be with me in paradise," recorded in Luke 23:43. Both the events of the tombs opening and the thief on the cross indicate that Jesus' death really does accomplish what it was supposed to accomplish. We might paraphrase what Jesus is saying as: "I am going to die and you are going to die, but we will not descend into hell because today you [thief] will be with Me in paradise." Earlier that day, the man had cursed Jesus; both thieves hanging on the crosses next to Jesus had done so. Yet the man is forgiven. The door to heaven, to God, to resurrection is opened through the death of Christ.

Matthew's Gospel continues by recounting the burial of Jesus. There must have been various responses to His death. Many people would be stunned, wondering what to make of the early death, the signs, and all the surrounding events. The mockers and blasphemers, including some Jewish leaders and the populace, would have rejoiced that they had slain their foe. The soldiers, perhaps slowly gathering their tools of the trade, were as unfeeling as spiders in an art gallery—not appreciating what was there. It was an unpleasant day's work, but the day was over. But one soldier was different, realizing that "Surely, this was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54). He had seen all that had happened—the execution of Jesus, the signs—and was the one truly realized what happened. Jesus' followers also had realizations: the faithful women, the other man on the cross, Joseph of Arimathea, who courageously goes and asks for the body of Christ. To identify with this condemned man and take charge of His burial was a great risk with no certain reward—no praise and no gain. All these followers showed their faith in Christ until the last.

Where do we stand today? There are still mockers who hate God. There are vast numbers who are indifferent. And there are His followers, who are still called to stand in awe of Him, to take the risks even when there are no rewards, to show faithfulness to Jesus, who was faithful to us to the end.