**JESUS WAS CRUCIFIED ON THE CROSS**

April 6, 2014

Luke 23:26-49

Key Verse 23:33 “When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left.”

Crucifixion was the cruelest method of execution ever invented by man because it delayed death until the maximum torture had been inflicted on its victim. It was possible for the victim to hang on the cross for days before dying very slowly of suffocation. The Roman Empire considered crucifixion such a heinous form of execution that they did not allow any Roman citizens to be executed in this manner except in extreme cases of treason. Crucifixion was so painful and such a horrible way to be tortured and killed that a new word had to be created to describe it. The word “excruciating” was invented to describe the pain and agony of the cross. The word “excruciating” literally means “out of the cross.” Yet, with the horror of the cross and crucifixion, knowing that Jesus died such a death, Christians chose the cross as a symbol to identify themselves with. For Christians, the cross does not represent pain, torture, and death. The cross symbolizes God’s love for us and the new life we can have through him. We need to think about why Jesus, the Son of God, was crucified on the cross.

**First,** Jesus carried the cross to unburden us of our burden of sins. Jesus was taken from the judgment hall and led to be crucified. They laid upon his shoulders a heavy cross and led him to the place of crucifixion by every road and street, while before him a soldier marched bearing a placard with his crime inscribed upon it: “The king of the Jews.” Jesus was exhausted and fell down. So the Roman soldiers whipped him. Blood dripped down from his forehead and his back. When Jesus collapsed, they seized Simon from Cyrene and put the cross on him. Why was Jesus carrying the cross in this way? It was to fulfill the will of God. In his great mercy, God sent his one and only Son as the Paschal Lamb to shed his blood for the sin of the world. John the Baptist knew this and said in John 1:29, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” Jesus carried the heavy cross so that we might no longer walk wearily, oppressed by the burden of sin. Jesus, as the Son of Man, took up all our infirmities and carried our sorrows.

God is deeply concerned about our life. He wants a relationship with us. We can fake things with our friends – we can act happy when we are not – you can come into our worship service and smile and pretend that your world isn’t falling apart. Pretend like everything is OK. Somehow we learn to fake happiness with each other – we get hurt, we pretend we don’t. We get ran over by the words of a friend, we pretend it doesn’t hurt. Pretty soon – that’s all we do. But we cannot fake it with God; He knows your sin; He knows what makes you excited about life; He knows everything about you. He looks at your life and mine and sees something different than our dressy clothes, polished smile, and fixed hair. He sees our heart, and sees that we are suffering under the burden of sins. Jesus was crucified to make us whole. 1 Peter 3:18a says, “For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.”

**Second,** Jesus was crucified on the cross to bear our shame and guilt. The executioners crucified Jesus between two criminals deliberately so as to shame Jesus in front of the crowd, regarding him the same as criminals. God made man with a sense of honor. So all men want to be honored; no one wants to be shamed. No one wants to expose his or her shame. Many people pretend they are not bothered at all by their sins. In truth, they suffer wretchedly in guilt and shame under the power of Satan. They are all like Cain, who lived with guilt and constant nightmares. But Jesus bore all our shame and guilt on the cross. When we believe in him, he frees us from shame and guilt.

When they came to the place called the Skull, they laid his cross flat on the ground, laid him on it, and, stretching out his arms on the cross, they drove the nails through his hands and feet. His whole body was soaked with blood. They propped him up on a jutting piece of saddlewood which bore his weight. Then they lifted up the cross and set it upright in its socket. Jesus was crucified in this way for our sins. St. Peter was the top disciple of Jesus. Outwardly he looked wholesome. But he was also under the power of sin. He confessed in 1 Peter 2;24, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.”

What is central to the cross is that Jesus was taking our place, taking our punishment for our sins, when he was crucified on the cross. Instead of it being you on the cross, Jesus was substituted in your place. Using Old Testament terms, Jesus became our sin offering. Romans 8:3 says, “For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering.” Jesus was substituted to take our place and our punishment for our sin. Let me illustrate it with an example. During the Civil War in the US, many acts of violence were committed by both the armies of the north and the south. One such act occurred in October of 1862 in the town of Palmyra, Missouri. The commander of the Union ordered ten men shot in retaliation for the work of an informer in the town who leaked information to the enemy. One was William T. Humphrey, the father of several children. His wife pleaded for his release because of the children and her poor physical condition. Because of this, the commanding officer struck Humphrey’s name from the list and chose the name of Hiram Smith, a 22-year old young man without a family. Hiram agreed to take the place of Humphrey, stating that perhaps it was better for a single man to die than a man with a family. The ten men were shot on October 17, 1862 in what has come to be known as the “Palmyra massacre.” At the Mount Pleasant Church cemetery, there is a stone erected at the grave of Hiram Smith by G. W. Humphrey, the son of the saved man. It reads: “This monument is dedicated to the memory of HIRAM SMITH, the hero who sleeps beneath the sod here, who was shot at Palmyra, October 17, 1862 as a substitute for William T. Humphrey, my father.” The whole reason we need to have Jesus as our substitute is summed up by John Stott: “The essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims rights which belong to God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to man alone.”

**Third,** Jesus prayed on the cross for sinners to be forgiven. Look at verse 34. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” According to a theologian, the word that is translated “forgive” is different from the usual meaning of forgiveness, namely, “to forget, to wipe out completely.” When we believe in Jesus, God forgives our sins; namely, he wipes away our sins and forgets them, never to remember them again. But that is not the word that is used here. The word that is used here is found also in Matthew 19:14. There it is used when children are brought to Jesus, and the apostles try to keep the children from coming to Him. “Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them.’” The word that is translated “let” in “Let the little children come...” is the same word translated “forgive” when Jesus said “Forgive them” on the cross. Jesus is praying to God, “Don’t rush to show your wrath. Hold your punishment. Don’t interfere.” How would a righteous God feel when a wicked world crucifies his Son? How would you feel? I would be angry, and if I were God, there would probably be a few lightning bolts flying in that crowd! But when Jesus prayed that prayer, God held back His wrath. And even now the prayer of Jesus is still being honored. God is still holding back his wrath. “Hold back the wrath,” Jesus prayed. “Give Roman soldiers who drive nails into the hands a chance to repent. Give angry crowds a chance to get right with God. I am paying the price, Father. Hold back your wrath. Give them the chance to repent, to be cleansed, and made new.” You and I are here today because the prayer that Jesus prayed 2,000 years ago is still being honored by God in heaven. That’s why the sun shines on the good and the bad. That’s why the rain falls on the just and the unjust. That’s why sometimes evil people seem to prosper while good people don’t. Right now forgiveness is still offered. But one day Jesus will come again as the Judge, and God’s wrath will be unleashed on the evil people.

**Fourth,** Jesus did not save himself in order to save us. The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.” The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” It is the instinct and drive of human beings to preserve oneself and survive by any means. As a man Jesus must have wanted to save himself and he had power to do so. The insults and mockery of the shameless people at the crucifixion ring with irony because Jesus chose not to come down from the cross for the sake of these very same wretched souls. Jesus did not save himself, in order to save men from their sins.

Many people were mocking Christ, including these two criminals. Luke tells us what one of the criminals said: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” “If you’re the Messiah, the Son of God, like you say you are, why don’t you get out of this situation? And get us out of here too!” This criminal blasphemes Christ, mocking his claim to be the Son of God. The way this criminal blasphemes the Messiah reminds us of how our world today blasphemes Christ. “Jesus is the Son of God?” people say. “I don’t think so. Why doesn’t he prove it? Why doesn’t he do something to prove that he is the Son of God, someone I should worship? Prove it!” People today mock the idea of Jesus being the Savior of the world, just like that criminal hanging next to Jesus. Unfortunately, we see ourselves as we see this criminal mocking Christ. We have more in common with that criminal than we would like to admit. In the eyes of God, all of us, really are criminals. All of us have led lives of disobedience and rebellion against God. “Do things this way,” God says. And we say, “No, I’ll do things my way instead.” We live lives that violate God’s will, over and over again. You and I are criminals in the eyes of God. Sometimes we even blaspheme our Savior. When things don’t go our way, we say to Jesus, “I doubt that you are the Savior. I doubt that you are the Son of God. Prove it. Prove that you are who you say you are. Show me!” we say. And this is blasphemy – on the same level as that criminal on the cross. We are sinners, and ultimately, it is because of our sin that Jesus is suffering. It wasn’t the Jews. It wasn’t the Romans. But it was us – our rebellion, our blasphemy, our sin – that’s what put Christ on the cross. That’s why he is suffering, taking the punishment that we deserve for our sin.

**Fifth,** Jesus was crucified on the cross in order to bring us back to paradise. One criminal hurled insults at Jesus praying. Surprisingly, the other criminal said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” The first criminal was hardened and unrepentant to the end. He could not accept God’s invitation to paradise through Jesus. On the other hand, the second criminal saw God in Jesus on the cross. He probably had not been interested in the kingdom of God during his lifetime. But on the cross, at the moment he was dying, the kingdom of God became very real to him. He admitted that he was a sinner. He saw in Jesus the kingdom of God. So he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He was a shameless guy who had lived a wretched life; but he wanted to go to paradise at the last moment, and asked for divine mercy upon him. Look at verse 43. “Jesus answered him, ‘I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.’” The angels in heaven must have been startled to hear Jesus saying, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” On the cross Jesus accepted this man’s faith, and this man became the first one to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus entered the kingdom of God with the criminal, condemned on the cross. Jesus died on the cross to bring us back to his glorious kingdom.

**Sixth,** Jesus was crucified on the cross to open the gates of heaven. Look at verse 44. “It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour.” The sun was eclipsed. The death of Jesus was so cruel that even nature mourned. Look at verse 45. “...for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn into two.” Through Jesus’ death on the cross, the door to God is now wide open. Before Jesus’ crucifixion, mankind groaned endlessly, bound by the chains of Satan. But through his death on the cross, Jesus opened the gates of heaven so that all men who believe in him may have the privilege of entering the glorious kingdom of God. Look at verse 46. Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Jesus did not die with a sad face. Rather Jesus died committing his soul to God. Jesus died on the cross confirming his love relationship with God. May God bless you to know the love of God when you look at Jesus on the cross.