

## **The Passion of the Crucifixion**

*Mark 15: 15 – 41*

It was a week that changed everything, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem to the shouts and acclamations of a hopeful and cheering crowd. But much can change in a week. Joyful shouts can give way to jeering mobs. Triumph gives way to tragedy. Celebration gives way to crucifixion.

Everything changed from Sunday to Thursday, yet nothing changed. The fear that drove the religious authorities was as present on Sunday as it was on Thursday night. The plot to arrest and kill Jesus was in place even before Palm Sunday, only the details had just not been needed to be put in place. The Jewish people were awaiting fulfillment of prophecy, joyfully celebrating that Jesus was intentionally fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah, but woefully disconnected from Isaiah's prophetic proclamation of the suffering servant. Nothing had changed for Jesus – he knew this week was the week that both prophecies would be fulfilled. Everything had changed, and yet nothing had changed.

It was the end of the week, and Jesus' earthly life was fading away as he hung on the cross just outside the city walls of Jerusalem, his broken and beaten body barely able to sustain life, nails through his wrists and his ankles, humiliated and scorned by religious leaders and Roman soldiers. Only a handful of people wept at his feet asking "Why?" But this is the question for disciples of Jesus Christ throughout the ages: why the cross? Without some understanding, or at least appreciation, of the cross we cannot fully comprehend the ministry of Jesus. Without the cross, Jesus was simply another teacher and healer who performed some unexplainable miracles, a phenomenon for his day with little meaning for the ages. But only with the cross can we call Jesus Christ Savior and Lord. Only with the cross can we be made right with God, bridging the chasm between our human condition and God's holy ways, what Christians through the ages have called the atonement – or being "at-one" with God. Yet we still struggle to understand how an event, no matter how dramatic or tragic, changes all of human history, and how it changes our lives. Four ways of understanding the cross have emerged through our tradition, three of which we will focus on today, and the fourth is reserved for that great celebration of the resurrection next week. The substitutionary or penal substitutionary theory, the sacrificial offering theory, and the subjective or moral influence theory are all means by which Christians seek to understand the amazing and wondrous gift of God's love. Each theory helps us to see how the great story of Christ's passion intersects with our human story, and each theory finds itself rooted in the circumstance and the people that Jesus encountered in his final hours as he went to the cross.

Early on Friday morning, there was a man sitting in prison within the Antonia Fortress; his name was Jesus Barabbas - an insurrectionist, a guerilla warrior, and a murderer. Barabbas had promoted violence and war, with little regard for human life, especially if it was a Roman's. Yet on the morning of his crucifixion, he was dragged out in front of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate himself, and offered up to the crowd along with another Jesus – Jesus of Nazareth, also known as the Christ. The crowd was given a choice – they chose Barabbas, and Jesus Christ went to Golgotha as Barabbas went free. As the nails were driven into the hands and feet of Jesus, Barabbas was somewhere in or near Jerusalem wrestling with the realization that Jesus

was on the cross while he went free. Jesus had taken his place on that cross between the two thieves. Jesus had taken his place; Jesus was his substitute – the first among many for whom Jesus was a substitute.

The substitutionary atonement theory, particularly held up by American evangelicals, tells us that only human beings can rightfully pay for the sins they have committed, and instead of each of us having to pay for our own sins, Jesus takes our place as a substitute for the punishment we deserve for breaking covenant with God. It is built on an understanding of a God who demands justice, who sent his son to satisfy the wrath of God for our sins. It is a theory that causes great anguish among many who find it inconsistent with a God of love. Even still, it is an understanding that forces us to look at the cross and appreciate the costliness of grace, a perspective that ought to change our hearts in gratitude for the distance that God is willing to go for us, like the father running out to embrace the prodigal, running out to meet you and I when we have decided we know better, that we can go it alone, that we are the authors of our own destiny.

The gospel of John sets Jesus' crucifixion on the day of Preparation for the Passover, the day when the lambs were slaughtered and the meal would be prepared. The synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – place the crucifixion on the day of preparation for Sabbath, with Jesus celebrating his last supper just hours earlier with a Passover meal. What all four gospels have in common is that there is no sacrifice of the lambs for Passover. This was intentional, for in the view of the early church, Jesus was the sacrificial lamb offered for the freedom of the world. Remembering that the first Christians were Jewish, they understood worship as offering and sacrifice, a means of giving to God signs of gratitude and praise, but also signs of remorse and repentance. The sacrificial offering theory gives us a glimpse of the crucifixion through the lens of the Old Testament sacrificial system, Jesus offering himself as a sacrifice for us all.

Unknowingly, the high priest Caiaphas pointed to Jesus as a sacrificial offering, as noted in John 18: 14 where it states, "*Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.*" We hear it in Jesus' own words from the cross, "*My God, My God why have you forsaken me,*" as Jesus voiced for all humanity our feelings of loneliness and abandonment in the midst of our greatest trials. Jesus offered himself – body, mind and spirit – so that *we* might never need to, that we would know that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. He was offered up, once and for all, even for Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin who conspired to put him to death, a sacrificial offering that the world through him might be saved.

Roman crucifixion was meant to be a brutal, humiliating deterrent, a dramatic show of imperial power. They always took place along major thoroughfares, and the condemned was required to carry the crossbeam from the place of his condemnation to the place of crucifixion, where the upright piece would be fixed in the ground. While the vertical beam was probably around twelve feet high, two to three feet of that were in the ground to maintain stability. The accused would have been tied or nailed to the cross beam, most likely through the wrist, which in ancient understanding, was still a part of the hand and not the arm. The body was then lifted up, already nailed to the cross beam, and the two pieces were fit together and secured in place. Recent archeological evidence demonstrates that unlike the popular understanding, the feet were nailed

through the ankle onto the side of the cross with the knees bent, giving the body little support, leading to suffocation and death. This meant that the accused was not hanging high above the gathered crowd, but hung only a foot or two off the ground where all who passed by could see him eye to eye.

Jesus therefore was not far away and separated from the guards, the crowds, or his followers who were at the foot of his cross. He watched closely as they gambled his clothes away. He heard the scoffers, the mourners, the curious. Many who passed by cursed him and spit on him, perhaps right in his face. And he could only say, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." In the cross of Jesus, we experience a divine drama that is meant to communicate the full extent of God's love, and as we experience this profound gift of grace, our hearts are changed and we are brought into a right relationship with God. This is what is known as the subjective or moral influence theory. If this act of hatred and violence against God's own Son could be forgiven, there is nothing that we can do, or will do, that God will not be forgiven, and out of gratitude, we are brought into the light of God.

The first letter of John states:

*Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

The crucifixion is that crucial moment in human history when God's great story of salvation intersects with the on-going story of humanity. The English word crucial is derived from the Latin root cruc-, or cross. The crucifixion is the intersection of God's hand of perfect love reaching down to a sinful human world. The vertical beam – God's reaching down to us, meets the horizontal beam – our human burden of sin and brokenness which we carry with us. When they come together, when they intersect in that crucial event of human history on Golgotha, the place of the skull, just outside the city walls of Jerusalem, the relationship of God with all humanity changed from disconnected to connected, from aloneness to community, from fear to love. This morning and through this week,<sup>5</sup> gaze upon the cross in awe for the amazing gift that we have received, and be willing to allow yourself to be transformed by the crucial moment in all of human history – the closing moments of the 24 hours that changed the world.