

Good Friday; April 7, 2023

1. Luke 23:34: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

Had Jesus been an ordinary prisoner, he would not have died that day. It was customary, even in that day and age, to show enough mercy to a condemned criminal to give him time to prepare for his death.

Jesus of Nazareth, Son of Man and Son of God, King of kings, and Lord of lords, abandoned and arrested at midnight on Thursday – before 9 o’clock on Friday morning is led out to Calvary to die.

They oppose him so bitterly, hate him so strongly, and are so grimly determined that he must be put out of the way.

By this time, he is a pitiful almost caricature of a man. Portions of his body have been beaten to a pulpy mass. His back is red and torn by lashes of the scourge, and his robe is wet with blood. His features are defaced by the blows of fists. The brow and scalp are pierced with a crown of thorns. The hair is matted and filthy. His own blood is mingled with his sweat.

Early on Friday he is led out to Calvary and within an hour the innocent Sin-Bearer has been nailed to the beams, and he hangs between earth and sky, with the hatred of his people dashing up against him in great waves of sound, their taunts, their laughter, and their curses beating against his heart like hammer blows.

He looks up at the leaden skies; he looks down at the milling mob; he sees the soldiers, their hands still bloody from the driving of the spikes, gambling with dice for his clothing.

He sees his own people, the sons and daughters of Abraham, frightfully misled by false and wicked leaders, shouting their hatred and contempt. And he opens his mouth to speak.

But what does he say? Does he curse these soldiers who had begun his torture? Does he rebuke his people in their ignorance? Is he bitter, resentful? Does he want revenge?

No. He asks his Father to have mercy on those below.

But what we would expect from no other man in this position is what we expect from this sinless Son of God. After all, it’s this same mercy with which he assures us daily that we have our Father’s forgiveness. We have come to know so dearly the mercy and compassion which made Jesus cry out, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.”

2. Luke 23:43: Jesus said to him, “Amen I tell you: Today you will be with me in paradise.”

There were several methods of crucifixion, just as there were several kinds of crosses.

The cross was sometimes fashioned in the shape of an X and sometimes in the shape of a T.

More often it was the type of cross we see in our customary crucifix, with a projection above the crossbar to carry that parchment superscription which declared to every spectator the nature of the victim’s crimes.

When they came to Golgotha that Friday morning, there were three men to be crucified, Jesus and two criminals. One, Jesus, was guilty of nothing, the others guilty of crimes warranting the worst punishment the state could offer.

Those condemned to crucifixion were normally forced to watch one another as each, in turn, submitted to the ordeal.

Two of these men were crucified by the brute force of the soldiers who labored with might to hold them down.

Once the nails had pierced the unwilling flesh, they lay still, numbed by the shock of it, almost unconscious as they were lifted up and the crossbeams with pegs and ropes were put into place.

The third submitted quietly, which must have made the soldiers wonder. We know of at least one, a centurion who was beginning to take notice.

It was after this execution had begun that the two criminals, not nearly so weak as Jesus because they had suffered not nearly so much, began a strange conversation. At first, both of them reviled this man who was placed between them, at the center of attention. One of them cursed him.

But after watching a while, the mind of the other was changed. He rebuked his blasphemous companion and in faith said to the man upon the central cross, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom."

With the dignity and the majesty of a mighty king, warmed by the kindness of a divine love, Jesus comforted him. He promised this criminal that his horrible suffering would not only soon be over, but that his last day on earth would also be his first in heaven. He told him Paradise waited for him. Jesus held up to this dying man the vision of the Garden of Eden restored, a scene of beauty, innocence, and peace where the stain and defilement of sin was absent and a new and perfect life would begin. We hear Jesus throw wide open the doors of heaven when he says to the criminal next to him, "Amen I tell you: Today you will be with me in paradise."

3. John 19:26-27a: When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother!"

A small group of Jesus' friends, mostly women, braved the danger and ridicule and remained at Calvary on Good Friday. Three hours before Jesus' death a number of them, including the beloved disciple John and three or four women, approached the cross and stayed with Jesus to the end. Most of the disciples had gone into hiding. John, too, had run the night before; but he was already back. As far as we know, of the Eleven only John was not afraid of exposing himself to ridicule and danger by being near to Jesus on Calvary. That same love he felt for his Master he showed to Jesus' mother, Mary, who stood near the cross too, by standing with her, supporting, and comforting her.

No doubt Mary recalled when back in the temple she had carried in her arms the precious Child whom she, above all others, knew to be a unique and wonderful gift of God.

No doubt beneath the cross now, she heard again the words of Simeon, words that she had never forgotten, words which now burned themselves into her memory. "Listen carefully, this child is appointed for the falling and rising of many in Israel for a sign that is spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Now she understood fully. There it was. The sign that is spoken against, the uplifted cross, and to it they had nailed God's Son and hers.

Here it was at last, the sword that was to pierce her soul. Now at last she knew.

Seeing them there, Jesus' mind broke free from his own excruciating pain. He thought of this brave disciple he loved, and he thought of his mother and her needs. And he made provisions for them both. From that time on John was to be like a son to Mary, someone to love and to be close to. From that time on Mary was to be like a mother to John, someone for John also to love and take care of as he was already doing here at the foot of the cross.

You and I too know this same love and concern of Jesus who cares for us not only in our spiritual needs but in our physical concerns as well. We hear Jesus' care for his mother, his dear disciples, and all of us whom he loves, when he says from the cross, "Woman, here is your son!" and to John, "Here is your mother!"

4. Mark 15:34: At the ninth hour Jesus shouted with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

There was nothing humane about crucifixion. It was intended to be horrifying.

It is likely the most painful and barbaric manner of inflicting the death penalty ever devised by the cruelty of humankind. And that is saying a lot.

The agonies of crucifixion were intended to last a long time and even the cross itself was engineered to bring about a slow and tortured death.

There was, for example, a saddle-like projection which supported the body just enough to keep it from being torn down by its own weight where the nails had pierced the hands.

The feet were not always spiked, but were sometimes tied to the timber with ropes. The feet of Jesus' feet were pierced by a nail.

Under ordinary circumstances the victim did not die directly from the wounds.

There was, at first, of course, a loss of blood and the experience of shock.

After the clotting process had stopped the flow of blood, the blood was forced to the head, and gangrene set in at the wounds.

The victim became first feverish, then cold, and soon he experienced a flaming, devouring thirst from which eventually, sometimes days later, he died. If not from dehydration, the victim died of suffocation after losing the strength to breathe, drowning in midair.

Meanwhile he could barely move because of the pain it brought from his wounds.

Through it all, his body was tormented by flies and other insects. It hurts just to think about it.

But Jesus suffered infinitely more than any other victim of this barbaric method of execution. There came a moment of darkness in Jesus' tortured and tormented soul, a moment equivalent to a whole eternity in hell. It was then that he cried to his God who had forsaken him. But no longer did Jesus address God as his Father, but instead a righteous God demanding payment for sins.

Even in the agony of Gethsemane, so intense that his sweat was like drops of blood, his prayer still was "O my Father." Likewise he addressed him as "Father" in the first word from the cross as well as in the last. But this moment was different. At this moment Jesus fulfilled what was said of him, "And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." At this moment he was utterly forsaken and abandoned by God. At this moment as he suffered the punishment of hell there was no "Father" to whom he could look, but only the righteous and stern God.

This suffering was more intense than we can ever imagine. Only one who has been actually and completely forsaken by God could explain what it meant, and no human being still on this side of the grave has ever been completely forsaken by God.

Here we see what it means when the Bible says that God made Christ to be sin for us. Only by being truly forsaken by God could the full price of redemption be paid. We have been bought at the highest price. And while we deserve to be forsaken by God, we know we are not, because Christ, our Lord and Savior, was forsaken in our place. We know that it was our pain and abandonment that Jesus suffered when he cried out, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?* My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

5. John 19:28: After this, knowing that everything had now been finished, and to fulfill the Scripture, Jesus said, "I thirst."

Jesus had gone through more than fifteen hours of enormous strain and torture without a drink. On his arrival there he had rejected the doped wine which was offered him as a sedative. After hanging on the cross for six hours, ridden with fever, emaciated, and by this time dehydrated, the thirst had become unbearable.

But what we want never to forget is that he bore this suffering willingly for us. He could have come down from the cross as his tormenters suggested. He was the Son of God. But he didn't. In fact, he didn't even cry out in vengeance against those who put him on this cross with their nails, their rejection, their sin. Rather he asked forgiveness for them, and the only expression of physical need to come from his lips was this fifth word, a word filled with meaning for you and me because it proves the reality of his human nature and the reality of his suffering. We know Jesus was our real, authentic, human substitute. He felt the pangs of hell and suffered because of it. His body suffered in our place, and Jesus expressed it with these words: "I thirst."

6. John 19:30: When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished!"

For some hours now the suffering Sin-Bearer has been hanging on the cross. His only cry of physical pain in all those bitter hours has been answered. Matthew writes, "Immediately one of

them ran, took a sponge, and soaked it with sour wine. Then he put it on a stick and gave him a drink.” It was the same sour beverage which was the Roman soldier’s daily ration.

Death was near now.

It is doubtful that many stayed to the end. But some still stayed and they heard Jesus speak once again. What they heard wasn’t the gasp of a man breathing his last as they expected, but rather a declaration of total victory. While his enemies on earth and below it were gloating over his apparent defeat, his message of triumph, whether shouted or spoken softly, came with eternal force, because he said salvation was won.

With this greatest single word ever uttered, Jesus announced the total completion of the assignment the Father had sent him to finish. Finished now was his redemptive work, the work of reconciliation and atonement. Finished was his time of humility. Soon glory and honor would be given to him on high. The power of the prince of hell had been broken, and Satan had been crushed under his heel. Paradise lost had become paradise regained.

What meaning these last words have for us! We no longer need we look to ourselves wondering what we must do to get back into the good graces of God. We no longer need to worry that our lives aren’t pure enough and that when the judgment comes, we will be handed over to damnation. All that was necessary for our salvation had been taken care of when Jesus said those words, “It is finished.”

7. Luke 23:46: Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!”

“It is finished.” It was a cry that went down to hell. It was a cry that rose into the very courts of heaven. It was a cry that proclaimed the victory over sin and death and hell.

Just one thing more. He is about to breathe his last, and his breath is very labored now.

Look! He moves! The head is lifting. He seems once more to be summoning his remaining strength.

It is the hour of the evening sacrifice when his last words ring out. They are words of trust directed to his God, who, now that hell’s fury has been suffered, he again addresses as “Father.” He is confident that in death his Father will care for him. With these words Jesus tells us he will calmly and peacefully fall asleep, confident of his imminent resurrection on Easter morning. Death is the wages of sin, and Jesus had become sin for us. But death will not be the end of him. The Father will keep him safe in his hand until he takes his life back in three days. And so it is with confidence and boldness Jesus Christ calls out from the cross, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!”

He bows his head. His body sags. The Son of God is dead.

Resurrection Candle

The Light of the world is extinguished in death, but we know the story of our dear Savior does not end there. We know Jesus will rise again Easter morning. And that’s why tonight, in the shadow of Jesus’ death, we light this resurrection candle. What we are saying is that no Christian in this world ever needs to remain in sadness, even on Good Friday. Jesus also rose in triumph over death

on Easter morning. When that happy day comes, we will rejoice in all his resurrection means for us and for all Christians. Go home this evening knowing your Lord loved you more than you can ever imagine, and his death proved it. And live every day of your life, even Good Friday, in the triumph of Easter.