

24 Hours That Changed the World: THE CRUCIFIXION

Mark 15:21-39

“Truly this man was God’s Son!”

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In the last six weeks, we have walked with Jesus through the last 24 hours of his life. We have identified with the various characters in the story. We have come now to the final act in the drama. Of course, you know. It’s not the final act.

In crucifixion, the Romans had perfected a method of execution that was designed to create a maximum amount of pain for the maximum amount of time. Often it took days for criminals to die on the cross. Crucifixion was also crafted to totally humiliate the victim and act as a strong deterrent to crime. It was always done in the public eye, so that nobody who ever saw a crucifixion would want to violate Roman law.

Classical art has done history a disservice when it comes to portraying the crucifixion of Jesus. For one thing, he usually looks pretty good, except for the nail part. The painters don’t show the battered, bloody mess he probably was. Mel Gibson was more historically accurate in the movie *The Passion of the Christ*.¹

The nails were said to go in his hands, and the wounds are often portrayed in the palms of Jesus. But the arms of crucifixion victims were either tied or nailed to the cross, to support the weight of the body. If they were nailed, the nails went in the wrist, so the bones could hold the body up. Also, there is a bundle of nerves in the forearm that would send shock waves of pain through the victim’s body with each breath.

Until recently, scholars thought the feet were nailed together to the cross, but a skeleton of a crucifixion victim excavated in 1968 shows the feet nailed individually from the side. So Jesus may have straddled the cross, which would have made it even harder to breathe. Of course, it could have been done different ways in different situations.²

Usually, we see the cross elevated far above street level, but we now believe the whole cross was only about nine feet high. Allowing room for the sign on the top, the face of Jesus would have been almost reachable to his mother and the disciples. He looked his tormentors right in the eye as they taunted him, and he still uttered words of forgiveness.

Death from crucifixion finally came because of one of three factors or a combination: suffocation, as the victim got too weak to pull up to breathe any more, or shock, from the

loss of blood and dehydration, or congestive heart failure, as the total stress on the body caused fluid buildup around the heart and in the lungs.³

It was an awful sight. Words can't even describe it. But the question continues in our minds as we think about it. Why? Why did he do this? Why did this have to happen?

We have talked about the meaning of the cross in terms of *atonement*. Through the cross, Jesus makes us “at-one” with God. One of the theories of atonement involves substitution—that Jesus died as a substitute for the punishment that we deserved because of our sin. The Sinless One took on our sin, so we could take on his righteousness. If we accept this gift of grace by faith, we are put in a right relationship with God.

We also talked about the meaning of the cross as moral influence—that the example of the radical love of Jesus, to suffer and die for us, is enough to make us repent of our sins, change our ways, and commit our faith to him. There is certainly no better example of the love of God that you will ever see.

Today I want to add another layer to the meaning of the cross—sacrifice. In the Jewish temple religion, sacrifices were offered for the sins of the people. Individuals made sin offerings to repent of their sins. On the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*), the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies in the Temple, beyond the curtain, into the presence of God, and make an offering for the sins of all the people.

In the New Testament, Jesus is called the new high priest for the people of God. He is the One making the offering to God for the sins of the world. And the offering is not a bull, but himself, the Son of God, given once and for all for every sin. This is not a matter of a brutal death placating a bloodthirsty God. It is a self-offering made in love, knowing that it would be effective for everyone who believes.

Adam Hamilton writes, “His magnanimous act—his suffering and death on behalf of humanity—served as an atoning sacrifice for all people; and the Father, by virtue of the Son’s love and self-giving, bestows grace and mercy upon all who claim the Son as their high priest and Savior. God the Father offers forgiveness and grace to us not because of our own merit, but because his dearly beloved Son suffered and died on behalf of the human race.”⁴

Jesus is, in the words of the old Communion service, “a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.”⁵

No one theory of the atonement—substitution, moral example, or sacrifice—is all right; none is all wrong. They have to be taken together, because the magnitude of this event is too big for just one explanation. But taken all together, the crucifixion of Jesus is an event that changed the world. And it can change you and me.

Again, we identify and relate deeply to this story. It’s our story. Let’s look at some of the characters around the cross, and see how they were transformed by their experience.

The first one is Simon of Cyrene. He was the man commandeered by the Romans to help Jesus carry his cross to Calvary. He was just a Jew in Jerusalem for the Passover festival. He was simply at the wrong place at the wrong time, and all of a sudden, he was standing next to this poor guy who was barely able to stand and helping him carry his cross to the place of execution. Kneeling down to pick up the cross, Simon looked into the eyes of Jesus. Talk about a day-changer.

More than that, it was a life-changer. Simon was transformed by his service to Christ. We lose track of Simon after the *Via Dolorosa*. History knows nothing more about him, except that Mark notes that he was the father of Alexander and Rufus. Why was that little

detail included? Perhaps because the Gospel of Mark was written for the church in Rome a generation later, and they would have known Alexander and Rufus, the sons of Simon, as leaders in the Roman church. In fact, Paul mentions Rufus and his mother in his greetings at the end of the letter to the Romans.⁶

How could you not be affected by helping Jesus carry his cross? I doubt Simon left the scene when they got to Calvary; he saw Jesus through to the end. That act of service began a family tradition of faith that stretched at least into the next generation.

The sacrifice of Christ calls us into service. We cannot watch him die and be unaffected. We have to do something. We have to pray more, worship more, learn more, give more, love more, help the poor, comfort the lonely, welcome the stranger. We have to find some way, some small way, to carry that cross, because he did it for us. Have you found some way to take up your cross?

Another person transformed on that Friday was the thief on the cross next to Jesus. Only Luke tells this part of the story. According to Mark and Matthew, the other two criminals crucified with Jesus also reviled him and taunted him on the cross—which seems like the most idiotic if not physically impossible thing anyone could do. They both may very well have started off that way.

But one of the criminals was more observant than the other. As the day wore on, he noticed the radiance of the love Jesus had, even in his broken state. He heard him say the words of grace and forgiveness, even as they were nailing him to the cross: *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*⁷ He could tell this was no ordinary criminal like himself. So he turned on the other man, still taunting Jesus, and said, *“Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.”*

Then the repentant thief turned to Jesus and said, *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*

Then Jesus spoke the ultimate words of grace, *“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”*⁸

It doesn't take much to come to Jesus. This thief on the cross had no resume, no good works to commend him. He was a robber being crucified. He wasn't a church member; he'd never served on a committee; he was not even baptized. He just recognized that he deserved the condemnation he was under, and he asked Jesus to remember him. And Jesus said, “I'll see you later.”

When you realize that the weight of your own sin is enough to separate you from God, and you ask Jesus to remember you, that is repentance. The Greek word means to turn your mind around, to turn away from sin and toward God. When you do that, you get transformed by grace.

The final transformation I want to talk about today is the Roman centurion. He was transformed by revelation. He was no Jew; he didn't understand the jealousy and intrigue going on with this Jewish carpenter. He was just assigned to the crucifixion detail. Maybe he had been one of the ones mocking Jesus earlier. But as the day wore on, and he watched Jesus on the cross, he could tell something was different about this man. He saw how the crowds treated him. He heard the words of forgiveness come from his mouth. And when Jesus finally expired, after only six hours (only!), this tough, battle-scarred Roman soldier

suddenly realized the truth, and he spoke it: “*Truly this man was God’s Son!*”⁹ This was God’s revelation to the centurion, and it is still God’s revelation to the world about Jesus.

This is the fundamental question the world is asking, and we have to answer. Is it true? Often the fundamental question is hidden beneath other questions: Is this helpful? Will it make my life better? Will it improve my success rate in whatever I attempt to do? Will I go to heaven some day? But deep down the question is truth: Is Jesus really the Son of God? Did he truly die for my sins? Can this story be trusted?

If it’s not true, it doesn’t matter. If it is true, nothing else matters as much. C. S. Lewis put it famously by saying that Jesus is either a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord. He is either a demon of Satan trying to mislead people, or he is just crazy and out of touch with reality. Or he is the Son of God and the Savior of the world, just like he says he is.¹⁰ Five minutes—no, five seconds—after you die, you will know for sure whether or not this is true. I’m betting my life it is true. I believe it to be true because I was transformed by this truth. Can you make that witness? Have you felt the grace of God at work in your life, so that you can look at Jesus on the cross and say without a doubt, “This man was God’s Son”? That revelation transformed the life of the centurion, and it can yours.

So finally, it comes to the end. The four Gospels record seven last statements of Jesus. Adam Hamilton talks about all seven in his book. I just want to end with one today. In Luke’s Gospel, the final words of Jesus are, “*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*”¹¹ Less than twenty-four hours earlier, Jesus had prayed for this cup of suffering to pass from him. When it was apparent that it could not, he submitted his will to God: “*Not my will but yours be done.*”¹² Now his hands were curled into useless fists hanging on nails—the hands that had touched children, cured diseases, opened eyes, and raised the dead. The feet that had walked the roads of Galilee, the wilderness of Judea, and the steps of the Temple would never take another. The voice that had calmed the storm and proclaimed the Kingdom and spoke creation into existence was reduced to an agonized whisper. The eyes that had seen all the kingdoms of the world, yet refused to deny his Father—the eyes that had looked into the face of the woman caught in adultery and said, “I forgive you; sin no more”—those beautiful eyes slowly closed in death. “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

But do not mistake those words for an admission of defeat. Do not think they are words of despair at all. Those are words of victory! Jesus had completed his task. He had done what he came to do. He was returning to the Father from whom he had come on that cold night in Bethlehem a lifetime ago. He was finished, but only because his work was complete.

What a beautiful prayer that would be for us every day: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” When you get up in the morning: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit this day.” When you experience frustrations or challenges, in times of great joy or sadness: “Father, come what may, into your hands I commend my spirit.” When you lay down at night: “Father into your hands, I commend my spirit.”

One of the details that three of the Gospels record is that when Jesus gave up his spirit, the curtain of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. This was the curtain that shielded the Holy of Holies, the curtain the high priest only entered once a year to make sacrifice for the sins of the people. It was the barrier between the sinful people and the holy God.

With the death of Jesus, the curtain was removed. No longer would there be any barrier between God and his people. Jesus had opened the way. No longer would they need to sacrifice for their sins year after year; Jesus paid it all and forever. Now the promise was complete that was made at his birth: God is with us, and we are with God, now and forever more.

When we look at the cross, we are transformed. We see the revelation of God's love; we see our need for repentance; we see our call to service. We see our whole world and the world to come.

One of the most beautiful pieces of religious poetry ever was written by Isaac Watts in 1707. Let me close with these words:

When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of Glory died;
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.

See, from his head, his hands, his feet,
sorrow and love flow mingled down.
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were an offering far too small;
love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.¹³ Amen.

¹ Mel Gibson, *The Passion of the Christ* (Ikon Productions, 2004).

² Adam Hamilton, *The 24 Hours That Changed The World* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 98.

³ William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, Floyd E. Hosmer, "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 255, No. 11, March 21, 1986, pp. 1455-1463.

⁴ Hamilton, 103.

⁵ *United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 28.

⁶ Romans 16:13.

⁷ Luke 23:34.

⁸ Luke 23:40-43.

⁹ Mark 15:39.

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Collins, 1952), p54–56. (In all editions, this is Bk. II, Ch. 3, "The Shocking Alternative.")

¹¹ Luke 23:46.

¹² Luke 22:42.

¹³ Isaac Watts, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," *United Methodist Hymnal*, #298.