

“IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN ME – IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN WE”

It is traditional on Palm Sunday to preach on the crucifixion of Jesus. Although it is a familiar theme for us it is unique to us. In a PBS television series titled, *The Christians*, the narrator said, *Christianity is the only major religion to have as its central focus the suffering and degradation of its God.*” The crucifixion of Jesus sets Christian faith apart from every other religion. No one in the ancient world imagined such a thing. In Fleming Rutledge's massive new book on the crucifixion of Jesus, she underscores the point:

The early Christian preaching announced the entrance of God on to the stage of history in the person of an itinerant Jewish teacher who had been ingloriously pinned up alongside of two of society's castoffs to die horribly, rejected, and condemned by religious and secular authorities alike, discarded onto the garbage heap of humanity, scornfully forsaken by both elites and common folk, leaving behind only a discredited demoralized handful of scruffy disciples who had no status whatsoever in the eyes of anyone. ¹

This morning, we're going to look at that story because Jesus, who is treated so unjustly triumphs in the end, and the goodness that triumphs in him reaches all the way to you and me and today. Jesus has changed lives, including mine, and infused hearts with great hope and deep healing. His story is what the Bible calls the gospel, a story full of its own life-giving power for those who receive it. It's the story of how ***Jesus suffered an atrocious human injustice in order to accomplish a gracious godly purpose.***

I. JESUS SUFFERED ATROCIOUS HUMAN INJUSTICE.

John 19 begins the morning after Jesus' arrest. **Luke 22** tells us that after Peter, one of his closest friends, denied him, he had been blindfolded, mocked, and beaten all night long. In the morning, he was brought to Pilate, the Roman governor, and we read in **John 19:1-3** *Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him.* ² *And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe.* ³ *They came up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and struck him with their hands.*

We can draw several observations about the suffering of Jesus. First

A. Jesus suffered the injustice of perverse hostility.

Look at **John 19:5-6**. *So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold the man!"* ⁶ *When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, "Crucify him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him."* Pilate has had Jesus severely beaten, cruelly scourged, crowned with thorns, and mocked, hoping the people will be satisfied with that. They aren't. *"They cried out, "Crucify him."* What had Jesus done to deserve this kind of hostility? Nothing!

Jesus himself helps to understand this hostility. It was during holy week, after Palm Sunday but before the crucifixion, that Jesus told what is called *The Parable of the Tenants*, in **Matthew 21**. He said: *There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers. Now it gets interesting! When harvest time comes, he sends servants to collect what's owed him, and the tenants beat one servant, kill another, and stone the third. He sends more servants, and the same thing happens. So finally, he says, "I'm going to send my son; they will respect my son."* But when the son came, the tenants killed him. Why were the tenants so hostile? The point of the parable is that they wanted to be their own masters. In pride and selfishness, they hated having to acknowledge the claims of the one on whom their existence depended. Jesus applied it to the Jewish nation in his day, but it speaks to all of us. We are all living on God's earth. God gives us life, and we are not our own, but one of the underlying issues, perhaps the heart of what the Bible calls sin, is that human nature resists God's rightful claims of authority. We react to claims of accountability with hostility. Jesus was revealing God and confronting people with God's claims and commandments. The reaction was rage.

One of the earliest of Christian authors was Melito of Sardis. He was a pastor and bishop in Smyrna in the second century. He wrote these words describing the crucifixion of Christ.

And he was raised on a cross, and a title was fixed indicating who it was who was being executed. Painful it is to say, but more terrible not to say.... He who suspended the earth is suspended, he who fixed the heavens is fixed, he who fastened all things is fastened to the wood; the master is outraged; God is murdered.

God came into our world in Jesus. There was no guilt in him. But all the so-called best people, the highest religious and governmental authorities, reveal a deep and perverse hostility to him.

When you look at Pilate, what you see is that it was not only hostility...

B. Jesus suffered the injustice of shameful moral weakness.

Pilate repeatedly says he finds no guilt in Jesus. If that's true, then the right thing to do is just to let Jesus go. But in the end, Pilate does not set Jesus free because he doesn't want to offend the crowd. He has him scourged and then hands him over to be crucified. *Pilate shows us that it is possible to sacrifice Christ for what might seem at the time to be very good reasons.* Pilate had good reason to be afraid that if he didn't satisfy the crowd, there would be a serious disturbance. It was his job to keep the peace. He had good reason to be afraid that if he didn't satisfy the crowd, they would appeal to Caesar and claim Pilate was disloyal in that he refused to execute a man who claimed to be the true king. Caesar, way off in Rome, wouldn't understand the complexities of the situation, so Pilate could easily justify what he did and could have probably found many friends who would have agreed with him and assured him that he really didn't have any other choices. I'm pretty sure that at some point, a sentence must have formed in Pilate's mind that went something like this: *"I don't want to do this, it isn't right, but I have to do this."* How often have we said something similar? Maybe we don't set out with the intention of denying Jesus or doing anything wrong, but we allow the fear of man to drag us into moral compromise.

Of course, in the end...

C. Jesus suffered the injustice of pure human cruelty

In **Galatians 5:11**, Paul talks about the *offense* or the *scandal* of the cross. You might be inclined to think the offense or scandal is simply that the Son of God was unjustly put to death. But Scripture tells us that it is not just the fact of his death in itself or even the injustice of it but the mode, the method, the means of it that is so offensive. How he died matters. When Paul writes to the Corinthians, he doesn't say the preaching of the death of Jesus or even the sacrifice of Jesus is foolishness to the Greek but the preaching of the cross. When he writes to the Philippians, he says Jesus humbled himself and became obedient unto death. But then, he adds these words, *even death on a cross*. The drama of our redemption is only appreciated when you see the depths of degradation and cruelty to which Jesus was exposed.

The first phase was the scourging. **John 19:1-3:** says: *Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. 2 The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe 3 and went up to him again and again, saying, "Hail, king of the Jews!" And they struck him in the face.* The Roman soldiers assigned to the flogging or scourging used a whip made of leather to which small pieces of metal or bone were fastened so that the cutting and tearing would go deep into the subcutaneous layers of tissue and deep into the muscles. It was also degrading. Paintings often show Jesus in some kind of a loincloth, but the Romans didn't do it like that. The victim would be stripped naked for maximum vulnerability, exposure, damage, and degradation. It tore people apart and broke them down. It often left them in shock and on the edge of collapse. You see that in the larger story, as Jesus stumbles under the crossbeam, he was being made to carry to Golgotha.

The second phase was the crucifixion itself. The word crucifix is used seven times in the verses we read this morning. Look at how it concludes in **verses 15-16**, *They cried out, "Away with him, away with him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar."* ¹⁶ *So he delivered him over to them to be crucified.* We don't need to go into all the details that are so well known—the large iron nails driven through flesh and bone and nerves and tendons. Victims of crucifixion died slowly. The word excruciating comes from the word for crucifixion. The bodily functions would be uncontrollable. There would be bolts of intense pain from severed nerves, the lacerated back scraping against the upright of the cross, muscle cramps, and unspeakable thirst. Of course, you read about the mocking, spitting, abuse of the crowd watching your unimaginable suffering and jeering at you. There is a unique horror in crucifixion in that the person nailed to the cross is forced to be a participant in their own agonizing death. The only way to take a breath of air is to push up against the weight of your body, causing terrible pain just to catch a breath to prolong the agony. The early theologian Origen called Jesus' death the *utterly vile death of the cross*. The famous Roman statesman and author Cicero referred to crucifixion as the supreme penalty, exceeding burning in gruesomeness. It's only when we look seriously at the cross of Jesus that we see a glimpse of what is meant, when **2 Corinthians 8:9** says, *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake, he became poor so that you by his poverty might become rich.*

Jesus suffered atrocious human injustice. But the reason we can claim to see the triumph of goodness in the last days of Jesus is because.

II. JESUS SUFFERED FOR A GRACIOUS AND GODLY PURPOSE.

In the middle of the story Jesus says something important. In **verse 10**, Pilate says: *"Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?"* **Verse 11** says: *Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."*

Jesus makes two points, which in turn lead us to two conclusions.

1.) First, Pilate was not as powerful as he thought. Pilate was really having this whole crisis imposed on him by the crowd and by Caiaphas, the religious leader who sent Jesus to him. Their sin was greater than Pilate's because they were imposing this situation on Pilate and were more malicious and willful in it than he was.

2.) Any power Pilate did have over Jesus was power that had been given to him by God for God's greater purposes. What Christ is saying in **verse 11** is, *"Pilate, you don't see clearly what is happening here. You are a small piece of a larger plan."* Jesus understood that the absolute sovereignty of God was working in and through all kinds of real human choices and circumstances. The Bible stresses this because it wants us to understand that God is giving His Son for us, and Christ is willingly giving himself for us, and the Holy Spirit is working out the will of God in all of the circumstances and dynamics.

These two points lead us to two conclusions. First,

A. Jesus suffered purposefully.

In the book of **Ephesians**, chapter **5:1-2**, the apostle Paul writes: *Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.* The word *sacrifice* is at the heart of it all. There are several ideas involved in sacrifice. Here are some analogies. In baseball, there is a sacrifice bunt. In a sacrifice bunt, you give up your chance for a hit to move another player forward. We use the word for soldiers who make the "supreme sacrifice," laying down their lives for their friends or their cause. In Chess, a player might sacrifice a pawn to gain an advantage in the outcome. A woman might delay marriage or put off having children because she doesn't want to have to sacrifice her career. On the other hand, we are familiar with how

often the word sacrifice is used to describe what parents give up to help their children and see them succeed. In all of these examples, at least two ideas are present. 1. Something of value is given up. 2. The purpose is to gain something that is counted even more precious. Look again at the explanation for this from **Ephesians 5:2**. *Christ gave himself up for us.*

Crucifixion itself was horrible but, for Jesus, the crucifixion also involved giving himself up to a profound inward agony. *When the darkness came, he cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"* Our salvation is not an easy option even for God. Scripture teaches that sin incurs a debt to justice and to God that has to be paid. On the cross, Jesus suffered the judgment of hell and damnation. In agony and anguish, alone, and degraded he suffered a loss of any sense of God's comforting presence.

Jesus suffered all this on purpose. He suffered sacrificially for us. He suffered in our place. His sufferings were what we deserve. We are the crowd, the religious leaders, the compromising Pilate we are all in that group represented, but Christ suffers for us and take the punishment we deserve. One of the most famous and powerful prophecies of Christ is Isaiah 53. In **Isaiah 53:4-6**, the prophet makes this point seven times lest we miss it. *Surely he has borne 1.) our griefs and carried 2.) our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.⁵ But he was pierced for 3.) our transgressions; he was crushed for 4.) our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought 5.) us peace, and with his wounds 6.) we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of 7.) us all.*

Our good works, our best efforts add nothing to what he accomplished for us in his sacrificial crucifixion. Later in this same chapter, **John 19:30**, as Jesus prepares to breathe his last he says in a loud voice, *"It is finished!"* Good works that we do can demonstrate something of the reality of our faith in him and love for him, but they can never add any merit at all to earn us our salvation.

Jesus suffered purposefully and

B. Jesus suffered willingly.

What Pilate seems to think is if Jesus would just work with him, he could save Jesus' life. He doesn't get it that Jesus is willing to suffer crucifixion even if he could get out of it. It's as if he says, "Come on,

Jesus, work with me, talk to me. Quit with the outrageous claims, and let me find a compromise." But Jesus suffers willingly. As the verse from Ephesians explains, *He gave himself up for us.*

I titled this message, *"It should have been me. It should have been we."* I'm thinking about the times when someone suffers or dies and the soldier who survives the battle or the family member who survives the fire when someone else doesn't, looks at what happened that person who suffered and died and says, *it should have been me instead of him.* The message of the gospel that Jesus gave himself up to shame, spitting, scourging, and suffering for our sakes, in our place. He was forsaken and condemned for the purpose of redeeming us, claiming us, saving us, restoring us, triumphing in and through us. It should have been me who suffered and was condemned. It should have been we. We are the ones who should be judged and condemned. But it was he who willingly took our place for love's sake and showed us grace – amazing grace.

Conclusion

There are two things, which, if you know them, can give you the strength to face all of life's challenges and difficulties. The first is the reality of the love of God. The second is the ultimate triumph of love and goodness. If you know that God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, then you know that God is a God who deeply loves you. And, if with that you know that His love will ultimately triumph over evil and His cause will be vindicated, then you have in those two truths two foundations stones on which you can build your life, a message that you can preach and to yourself, treasure in your heart and share with the world; God is love, and God's love will triumph over evil because of the greatness of Jesus and his sacrifice.

No matter where you're coming from, no matter what you've done, God is holding out grace to you. He doesn't require you to get better first or to show you deserve it—because you don't and you can't. He asks that you repent and believe the gospel. Will you? Do you believe? If so, then you believe something that has incredible power to inspire and change you. So believe it personally, deeply, and boldly. Believe it in the grip of temptation and it in the face of hardships, so it inspires you to trust and obey. Believe it every hour of every day.

Amen

A Prayer for Receiving Christ

Almighty God, You have beautifully revealed your love in Jesus. I freely admit my need for his saving grace. I acknowledge my sins for I have gone my own way and broken your laws of life. I turn to you for grace and trust in Jesus Christ. I believe he lived the perfect life I have not lived and died on the cross to pay for my sins. I receive and rest on him alone for my salvation. Grant me the new and eternal life promised to all who come to him in faith. I ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

Lord Jesus, I confess I do not fully understand how you loved me and gave yourself up to degradation and anguish for me. Forgive the perverse resistance to your lordship that still rises up in me. Forgive the moral weakness and compromise that still clings to me. Grant that I might run my race looking unto Jesus who for the joy set before him, endured the cross despising the shame. Fill me with your Holy Spirit so that I can fully follow Christ as my Lord and Savior. Amen.

A Prayer for People who need Christ.

I pray not only for myself and the church but also for others who also need Christ. Please send your Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of the people you have placed in my life, to draw them to Jesus and make them kingdom laborers. I ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

¹ Rutledge, Fleming, *The Crucifixion, Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan. 2015. Note: Rutledge's book on the Crucifixion has many insights, many of which have helped me in my preparation for this message. It also has some difficulties and questionable parts. For a good review check out - <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/the-crucifixion/>