

Last week and this week, I am looking at some of the events surrounding the end of Jesus' earthly life, as we prepare for Easter Sunday next week. Last week we focused on Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus willingly submitted to the plan that He and the Father and the Spirit had from all eternity to save us from sin and death by drinking to the bottom the cup of God's righteous wrath on human sin. At the end of Jesus' time in the garden, he was betrayed by Judas and arrested. The Jewish religious leaders charged him with blasphemy, for making himself out to be God, and turned him over to the Romans, accusing him of setting himself up against Caesar as a king. And although Pilate found no reason to execute him, he feared the anger of the crowd, and so he gave in to their demands, sentencing Jesus to death by crucifixion.

This morning, we are going to read a portion of the crucifixion accounts from Luke, Matthew, and John's gospel, paying attention to the seven final sayings of Jesus on the cross. This is of course the central event of the Christian faith, the central event of the whole Bible; even Paul writes in *1 Corinthians 2:2* - *For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified*. Let us pray that as we meditate on his crucifixion, we would truly understand why it is so important and what it means for us.

Luke 23:32-47 - *Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed.* 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.* ³⁴ *Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."* And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. ³⁵ *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."* ³⁶ *The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar* ³⁷ *and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."* ³⁸ *There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.* ³⁹ *One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"* ⁴⁰ *But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence?"* ⁴¹ *We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."* ⁴² *Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."* ⁴³ *Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."* ⁴⁴ *It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour,* ⁴⁵ *for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.* ⁴⁶ *Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."* When he had said this, he

breathed his last. ⁴⁷ The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man."

Matthew 27:45-54 - From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. ⁴⁶ About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "**Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?**"-- which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ⁴⁷ When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah." ⁴⁸ Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. ⁴⁹ The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him." ⁵⁰ And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. ⁵¹ At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from **top to bottom**. The earth shook and the rocks split. ⁵² The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. ⁵³ They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people. ⁵⁴ When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"

John 19:25-30 - Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," ²⁷ and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. ²⁸ Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "**I am thirsty.**" ²⁹ A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and **lifted it to Jesus' lips**. ³⁰ When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "**It is finished.**" With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Jesus, having been betrayed by Judas, accused of blasphemy by the Jewish leaders, and tried by the Roman leaders, is led out to be crucified. Crucifixion was a public execution used to deter law breaking and to intimidate the people into obeying the authorities. Jesus is nailed to a cross between two criminals. And as he hangs there on the cross, he speaks seven last statements.

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

"I tell you truth, today you will be with me in paradise"

"Dear woman, here is your son. Here is your mother."

"I am thirsty."

"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

"It is finished."

"Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit."

This morning, I'm going to focus on four of those statements and use them to help us to understand why Jesus died.

1) **Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing**

*Luke 23:32-37 - Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. 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. ³⁴ Jesus said, **"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."** And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. ³⁵ 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." ³⁶ The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷ and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."*

You may remember when Jesus was arrested, his disciples Peter tried to come to his defense, taking a sword and chopping off the ear of the servant of the high priest. And Jesus essentially told him, "what are you doing?" **Matthew 26:53** – "Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve **legions** of angels?" I think of that statement, and I think of Jesus here, the Son of God, being mocked, sneered at by the rulers, the chief priests. You can't even save yourself! Jesus, with His divine power, could have wiped every last one of them out at once if he so chose. But instead, he chooses not just to tolerate the abuse, but to ask the Father to forgive them for their ignorant actions.

God's grace towards the ignorant is a theme in the New Testament:

*Acts 3:17-19 - "Now, brothers, I know that you acted in **ignorance**, as did your leaders. ¹⁸ But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer. ¹⁹ Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord,*

*Acts 17:30-31 - In the past God overlooked such **ignorance**, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹ For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."*

1 Timothy 1:13-14 - Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. ¹⁴ The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Look at the common theme. You were once ignorant. You didn't know who this Jesus was. But now you know. And now that you know, there is forgiveness and grace offered to you if you will repent, confess and turn from your sinful self-centeredness to trust in Jesus for your salvation. For those of you who have been ignorant, today is the day of salvation.

On that cross, Jesus chooses not to destroy the people who are abusing him, but to forgive them. Think about the people who have hurt you the deepest. If you had the power to destroy them, don't you think you would have drawn on that power, maybe just once? And here is Jesus, crucified between two criminals, saying "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Instead of calling down a curse on his tormentors, He loves them with a perfectly divine compassion and prays for their forgiveness. He perfectly lives out his command to "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you." To the very end, Jesus perfectly loves God and loves others. This line – "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" - can be immensely helpful in forgiving others.

This first statement of Jesus gives us a picture of the compassion and mercy of our God, not just towards his accusers, but towards us as well:

Romans 5:6-8 - You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

This is the amazing grace of our God.

The second line is this:

³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing

wrong." ⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."
⁴³ Jesus answered him, **"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."**

Jesus is crucified between two criminals. One mocks him, but the other recognizes that Jesus is innocent, and asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom. In this criminal, we have the perfect example of repentance and faith – he acknowledges his guilt, saying “we are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve.” He acknowledges that Jesus is innocent – “this man has done nothing wrong.” And he believes that Jesus is the Lord and has the power to save him despite his sin – “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And Jesus tells Him that today He will be with Him in paradise. Isn’t that remarkable? This man will never do anything to deserve God’s love and favor. He won’t be baptized, won’t do any good works. And surely, he confessed partly out of fear. But Jesus still tells him that he will be with him in paradise. **This is the ultimate example of the grace of God.** Think of the verse in “To God be the glory” – “The vilest sinner who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.”

This story is so... offensive. Imagine that this criminal has raped and murdered your daughter, your sister. You have come to witness his execution, to cheer as he gasped for breath, to see justice served. And then you see this man plead to Jesus, and Jesus tell him that he will be with him in paradise. What?!?

Or, imagine you are a good, religious person. You went to synagogue, followed the commandments, gave to the poor and served. And this man gets to live a wicked life and then Jesus accepts his deathbed confession? C’mon God.

As long as you believe that God owes you for your good deeds, you will be offended by this passage. But the truth is that no one deserves God’s grace. All deserve eternal separation. Including you. You are that criminal on the cross, and you will either mock him or cry out to him to save you.

Grace is an undeserved gift from an unobligated giver. This man did not deserve paradise, nor did Jesus owe him anything, but Jesus freely gave him a place in paradise because of his confession. Listen to a few passages that speak to salvation by grace in the writings of the Apostle Paul:

Ephesians 2:8-9 - **For it is by grace** you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, **it is** the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

Romans 3:22-24 - This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Romans 4:4-5 - Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. ⁵ However, to the man who **does not work** but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

This second saying of Jesus shows us that salvation is not a merit system. The criminal acknowledges his sin, Jesus' death for His sin, and casts all his hope on Jesus. He puts his trust in Jesus, not in his own righteousness.

Are you offended? You're not alone. This is how the Pharisees, the religious leaders, felt, and this is what Jesus said to them: **Matthew 21:31-32** - Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the **prostitutes** are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³² For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the **prostitutes** did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

You did nothing to deserve salvation, God's favor. If you recognize that grace and mercy of God in your life, then you have no right to pride or to get offended at Jesus. **And you will also know that no one is too far from God.**

This is the third line:

Matthew 27:45-54 - From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. ⁴⁶ About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "**Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?**"-- which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Jesus was betrayed, denied, and nailed to a cross so that he might die in the most agonizing and humiliating form of torture and death available to the Romans. But Luke does not record Jesus crying out about his disciples, or about the pain. Why? Because those traumas were nothing compared to the suffering from being separated from the Father.

What does Jesus mean when he cries out to God? Remember Jesus in the Garden – he knows that on the cross, He will drink the cup of the wrath of the Father on

human sin. On the cross, He took on himself the sin of the world and the Father abandoned Him.

When Jesus says “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” he’s actually quoting Psalm 22. As usual, he has Scripture on the tip of his tongue. Listen to some of the verses of this Psalm and how they prophesy of what is happening to Jesus:

*Psalm 22:1-2, 7-8, 11-18, 27-31 - My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? ² O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent... ⁷ All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: ⁸ "He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him."... ¹¹ Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help. ¹² Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me. ¹³ Roaring lions tearing their prey open their mouths wide against me. ¹⁴ I am poured out like water, and **all my bones are out of joint.** My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me. ¹⁵ My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. ¹⁶ Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. ¹⁷ I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. ¹⁸ They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing... ²⁷ All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, ²⁸ for dominion belongs to the LORD and **he rules over the nations.** ²⁹ All the rich of the earth will feast and worship; all who go down to the dust will kneel before him-- those who cannot keep themselves alive. ³⁰ Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord. ³¹ They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn-- for he has done it.*

This Messianic Psalm prophesies Jesus’ death, and that in His death, God will be glorified and people will come to the Lord.

From the first two quotes on the cross, we’ve seen that the death of Jesus is about forgiveness and grace from God to us. **But how do you get that forgiveness and grace?** How can a holy God overlook your sin and offer you eternal life? Somebody had to pay. Justice must be satisfied. The only way to bridge that gap was for the Son of God to live a perfect life and die a sacrificial death. On the cross he cries out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This is the Son of God experiencing the abandonment of His Father. At that moment he drank the cup of God’s wrath to the bottom, experiencing cosmic abandonment by the

Father. At that moment the Passover Lamb was slain, so that His blood might shield you from death. He took on your sin, experiencing the absence and judgment of God. That should have been you up there. God's grace and forgiveness may have been free to you, but they did not come cheap. They were earned by Jesus Christ through His life and death.

2 Corinthians 5:21 - God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

He was forsaken so that you never will be.

Hebrews 13:5 - God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

God is able to offer you forgiveness and welcome you into paradise because Jesus willingly took the punishment that you deserved for your sins and gives you His righteousness.

And finally, the last line:

John 19:29-30 - A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. ³⁰ When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

The last thing Jesus says on the cross is "it is finished." This statement raises two questions immediately to my mind – what is finished and what is the significance of finishing whatever he finished?

The Greek word for finished is 'Tetelestai,' which means "carrying out the will of somebody, and so to fulfill obligations." Jesus is declaring that he has carried out the Father's rescue mission perfectly. He lived the perfect life – which was necessary in order to be not only our example but the perfect sacrifice for sins.

1 Peter 1:18-19 - For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

The mission is finished – he lived the perfect life and died the sacrificial death for us.

But that is not all he meant when he said “it is finished.” Remember what Matthew wrote in his account of the crucifixion:

Matthew 27:50-51 - *And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. ⁵¹ At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.*

The curtain separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple was torn – from top to bottom, as if God was saying “we won’t be needing this any more!” The Holy of Holies was the place where God’s spirit dwelt in the temple, and was entered once a year on the Day of Atonement by the high priest to make atonement for the sins of the people. With the death of Jesus, this dividing curtain has been torn, signifying two things: **first, that this sacrificial system of sacrificing animals to atone for sins has come to an end, and secondly that every believer now has unrestricted access to God and to forgiveness of sins.** “It is finished” means that the old way of getting right with God is gone, and that salvation has been offered once and for all by Jesus, so that all can have free access to God and the forgiveness of sins that He offers.

On that cross, Jesus offers forgiveness and grace to all, from the ones who are murdering him and mocking him to the criminal hanging next to him. He experiences the forsakenness and judgment of God, and by doing so makes a relationship with God possible for all. He finishes the work perfectly, opening the door to God for all to come in. Would you believe today?

2 Corinthians 5:17-21 - *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who **reconciled** us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be **reconciled** to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Jesus has made a way for you to be right with God. Enter into a relationship with Him today!

And for those of you who already know God, take to heart these words of Charles Spurgeon regarding Jesus’ death for your sins:

Let us abhor the sin which brought such agony upon our beloved Lord. What an accursed thing is sin, which crucified the Lord Jesus! Do you laugh at it? Will you go and spend an evening to see a mimic performance of it? Do you roll sin under your tongue as a sweet morsel, and then come to God's house, on the Lord's-day morning, and think to worship him? Worship him! Worship him, with sin indulged in your breast! Worship him, with sin loved and pampered in your life! O sirs, if I had a dear brother who had been murdered, what would you think of me if I valued the knife which had been crimsoned with his blood? —if I made a friend of the murderer, and daily consorted with the assassin, who drove the dagger into my brother's heart? Surely I, too, must be an accomplice in the crime! Sin murdered Christ; will you be a friend to it? Sin pierced the heart of the Incarnate God; can you love it? Oh, that there was an abyss as deep as Christ's misery, that I might at once hurl this dagger of sin into its depths, whence it might never be brought to light again! Begone, O sin! Thou art banished from the heart where Jesus reigns! Begone, for thou hast crucified my Lord, and made him cry, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" O my hearers, if you did but know yourselves, and know the love of Christ, you would each one vow that you would harbour sin no longer.

Recognize the body of Jesus on that cross. Give Him the worship and allegiance He is due, and put to death the sin that nailed Him there, that you might follow Him. Amen.