

“24 Hours that Changed the World—The Crucifixion”

Late one night last week I was channel surfing and I couldn't help but stop to watch a show called "1,000 Ways to Die." These were supposedly real stories of stupid things people have done that have cost them their lives. Everything from intentionally swallowing tape worms to lose weight, to hiding from the police in a cardboard crusher, to taking a nap in an industrial kiln. People unintentionally doing something that cost them their lives. There are at least 1,000 ways to die.

Sometimes we forget that the cross was an instrument of death, just like an electric chair, just like an hangman's noose, just like a guillotine. It's hard to remember that about the cross when we wear crosses as jewelry. And find pretty ones to put on our walls. People are constantly marveling at the cross of crosses in our lobby. It's beautiful, and sometimes because it's beautiful we forget that was an instrument of death. Not an accidental either, but for Jesus he knew it was coming, he had an idea of what it would be like, and he allowed himself to be crucified anyway.

In our living room we have a picture of the crucifixion by Salvador Dali. I'm not big into surreal art, but this was gift and there is one part of it that grabs me; that makes me think. If you look carefully, you see that there are no spikes through the hands and feet. The idea is that for Jesus it wasn't the spikes of the crucifixion that held him there, it was his love that held him to the cross. It was the job he came to do that held him to the cross. And we'll talk more about that later.

When we really think about the cross and the crucifixion of Jesus as a means of torture and death, we're tempted to turn away. Because if we look what we see is too painful to bear. We're tempted to turn away. Like we turn the channel when the pictures of the starving children come, or pictures of the ravaged AIDs patient, or pictures of the Nazi death camps. Just like we turn away in the grocery store when we hear some irritated, frustrated parent uses words to grind their kid down. I've turned away from too many things in my life that I really should have stopped to see, really see.

So you, me, we, may be tempted to turn away from the scene unfolding outside Jerusalem at the place of the skull. Because it is so ugly and sad we don't want to see. But listen, listen, it's a mistake to turn away. It's a mistake not to see this. Because what's happening on the hill called Golgotha says something important about us. And because what's happening on that hill outside Jerusalem says something even more about God.

We've been looking at the last 24 hours of Jesus' life. The last supper, how Judas betrayed him, Peter denied him, and the rest of the disciples deserted him. How supposedly righteous people plotted against him, and ultimately convicted him of blasphemy against God. How those religious leaders wanted Jesus out of the way because he represented too much change and threatened their way of life. How Jesus was whipped until the flesh on his back was torn loose exposing his muscles and bones.

And that brings us to today. After Jesus is flogged he's led back into the courtyard of the palace. Mark tells us the *whole cohort* of soldiers came out to have some fun with this particular prisoner. A cohort of soldiers would have been between 450 and 600 soldiers. The entire company of soldiers gathers to mock and humiliate Jesus. Maybe because rumor had spread that this one claimed to be a king. They stripped him naked to increase his shame and make him even more vulnerable. They put a purple robe on him, on that tattered flesh of his back. They put a crown of thorns on his head. "If he says he's a king, let's make him a king!"

There's no record of Jesus saying anything in response to all of this. He's silent. Are you tempted to turn away? I am.

After the soldiers have had their fun they put Jesus' own clothes back on him and lead him out to crucify him. The consensus of many in the ancient world was that crucifixion was so brutal that if you knew it was coming, suicide was a better option. The Romans used crucifixion as a deterrent to crime, to rebellion, it was such a terrible death.

The prisoner was expected to carry his own cross. Most scholars agree that it wouldn't be the whole cross just the horizontal cross-piece. The weight of that could bring a healthy man to his knees after a short distance, but for a man who had been flogged to carry the cross beam was nearly impossible.

Jesus stumbles. Simon, a man from Cyrene, is pulled out of the crowd and put to work carrying Jesus' cross beam.

They lead Jesus out to a place called Golgotha. The name means "place of the skull." There may be two reasons for the name. First, the outcrop of rock where the crucifixions took place may have kind of looked like a skull. Second, sometimes the bodies of executed criminals were just left on the ground. So Golgotha may have gotten its name from the scattering of human skulls on the ground.

The squad of soldiers who have been assigned to crucify Jesus offer wine mixed with myrrh. Myrrh was a pain killer so this drink would have helped numb the pain Jesus was about to go through. But Jesus doesn't drink it. Maybe he just wants to be wide awake, fully alert.

Crucifixion was a slow way of killing someone. People would sometimes hang on the cross, alive, for more than two days. We always think of people being crucified by having spikes driving through their wrists, but archeological finds show us that sometimes ropes were used to tie the prisoner's arms to the horizontal beam, and other times nails would be driven through the prisoner's hands. Nails were also driven through the prisoner's ankles or feet.

Prisoners sometimes would bleed to death. Sometimes they'd die from dehydration or exposure. But most of the time they would suffocate. It took enormous energy to breathe hanging from a cross. Eventually he would just give up.

Verse 24 tells us the soldiers then went to work crucifying Jesus. He would have been stripped naked, laid out against the wooden beams, and then nails would have been driven through his ankles or feet. Nails were driven through the hands of Jesus. Then, the cross was raised up and dropped into a hole in the rock. I've always thought of the crosses being tall, high off the ground. But evidence suggests that the vertical beam of the cross would have been between 6 or 7 feet tall. Not way up in the air. So Jesus would have been able to look right into the eyes of people standing nearby.

The soldiers assigned to his detail gambled to see who would get the clothing left behind. They put a sign above Jesus' head with the charge against him. It read, "King of the Jews" On either side of Jesus the Romans crucify two criminals.

Mark tells us that people passing by laughed at Jesus. Mark writes, **"Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, 'So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!'" (Mark 15:29-30, NIV).**

The Jewish religious leaders were there too. They mocked him and said things like, **"He saved others, but he can't save himself!" (Mark 15:31, NIV).**

At noon, after he has been on the cross for three hours, the sky turns dark. It seems like the world is holding its breath. At three in the afternoon Jesus cries out in a loud voice, **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"** He's quoting the first verse of the Psalm 22 in the Old Testament. Jesus is in agony. The words he cries out tell us that. He and God have never lost touch with one another, the Father and Son are still one, but this torment is overwhelming. To hang on the cross, to endure that pain, to suffer through the loneliness of it, was just soul-crushing and heart-breaking. The words Jesus cries out tell us that.

Those words are the first line in the 22nd Psalm and if that's all we hear it sounds so desperate; so alone. But if read the rest of the 22nd Psalm you can see all of what Jesus had in mind. That Psalm is all about what is happening in that moment. You'll read it this week but here are parts of it, this is what Jesus was thinking: **"All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads...Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.**

"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. My strength is dried up...and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth...dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.

"But you, O LORD, be not far off; O my Strength, come quickly to help me...I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you.

“All you descendants of Jacob, honor him! Revere him, all you descendants of Israel! For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.

“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...They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn-- for he has done it” (NIV).

In this moment of darkness, in this humiliation, in this pain, Jesus cries out, and the words he chooses are from a Psalm he would have known from childhood. It's a song that talks about God's final victory, God's ability to deliver us out of life's worst moments. Then Jesus gives a loud cry and, Mark tells us, that he *breathed his last*.

At the very moment Jesus dies the curtain of the temple is torn in two. There was a very holy place in the Jerusalem temple. It was the place where the spirit of God was supposed to live. Nobody except the high priest was allowed to go in the Most Holy Place. The tearing of that curtain is meant to show us that all barriers between God and humanity have been torn down. Because of what Jesus just did in giving his life, the barrier between God and us is gone.

One reason we pay attention to the crucifixion of Jesus, we don't turn away, is because we believe that through the cross God brings us back to himself. The fancy word for this is “atonement.” I think of it as “**at-one-ment**.” Sin took us away from God. We have made decisions that have come between us and God. We've let the wrong kinds of things rule us. And on the cross God takes the initiative to bring us back to himself. On the cross God takes the initiative to shove out of the way anything that gets in the way of our relationship with him.

Christians have several different ways of understanding the atonement. **One way is about substitution.** It's about seeing that Jesus takes our place on that cross. He's our substitute, taking our punishment. The world is broken. We are broken. We are capable of doing great things, wonderful things, generous things, courageous things, loving things.

And we are capable of doing terrible things, destructive things, selfish things, cruel things, deceitful things. We give our hearts to the wrong things and we ignore the things that really are good, really are best.

We owe a debt for the wrong things we've done. We owe a debt for the good things we never got around to doing. And when we go through life breaking things and people and promises, when we go through life not caring how we let anger or fear or hatred control us, there is a bill to pay, and we can't pay it.

One way of looking at the cross is that instead of us paying the penalty, instead of us making things right, God steps in. Jesus chooses to be the substitute. We should have to pay for our sins. But Jesus steps in and says, “No. I will pay their debt. I'll take their place.” God chooses to step in so that we don't have to pay the penalty we owe for the wrongs we have done. God chooses to become the substitute. He accepts the punishment that should have been coming our way.

It all boils down to this: What do you do with the cross? Some of soldiers at the foot of the cross, they just want some stuff. Is that you? You're going walk out of here today just worried about stuff. Mostly concerned about where you're going to eat after church, what you're going wear, what kind of house you'll live in next. Is that it? Is that what you do with the cross?

One other soldier was close enough to hear what Jesus said and see what Jesus did with the insults and the pain and he said, “**Surely he was the son of God**” (Luke 27:54). Is that what you do with the cross?

Jesus is there being insulted, mocked, people often threw rocks and garbage at people on crosses. The roman soldiers gamble for Jesus clothes, the religious leaders add insult to injury by taunting Jesus. But Jesus says, “**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing**”(Luke 23:34, NIV).

I have a hunch that that's what affected the criminals crucified next to Jesus. Or at least one of them. There are two bandits being crucified on either side of Jesus. Both of them mess-ups in their lives, both deserving death, both at the end of their lives. One insults Jesus. It's like one last ditch effort to be better than

somebody. We all do it, try to find somebody that we can be better than, somebody we can push down to make ourselves look good. That's what one thief died with.

But the bandit on the other side heard Jesus' words, saw Jesus' amazing forgiveness, saw his compassion on the very people who nailed him to that cross. That bandit said, "This is where life is found. Remember me Jesus, when you come into your kingdom." He's saying, "I'll follow you. I don't get it all, but I see real life in you and I'll follow you."

What do you do with the cross? The apostle Paul put it this way, "**There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...**" (Romans 8:1, NIV). In other words, you're free! You are forgiven and free. You are forgiven and loved. What do you do now?

A while back I heard a story that relates to this. During the Korean War there was a village that had been liberated by the U.S. forces. It was right on the border between North and South Korea. After they liberated this village from the North Koreans the soldiers started to let their guard down a little. A North Korean soldier snuck into the village in civilian clothes, saw five soldiers standing there talking to one another and took that as his chance. He took a hand grenade out of his pocket, pulled the pin and threw it into the middle of them. One them, out of the corner of his eye saw the grenade hit the ground and he ran toward the grenade and fell on top of it just as it exploded. His life was snuffed out in a heartbeat. But there was not a scratch on those other men.

One of those men, when he came back home, said this, "Nothing has ever been same since my friend died for me, nothing. When I came back to the U.S. I was determined that I would live a life worthy of his gift and his sacrifice, that from that time forward I had to recognize that my life, every day, cost another man his life, and because of that I will live differently from this time forward. I will live for him the life he might have lived. Nothing has been the same ever since."

The love we see on the cross, the love we see God has for us, changes us. It turns us inside-out. It wins over these rebellious hearts. We want to love and honor and serve the God who loves us the way God does on the cross.

What do you do with the cross? Shrug it off? Or will you begin to say, "This cross, I choose not to turn away, I choose to see it. I choose to alter my life because of that sacrifice and love. I choose to let the cross affect how I treat people. I choose to let the cross affect how I make daily decisions, how I do business. I choose to let the cross affect what I let my eyes see, and what I let my ears hear. I choose to let the cross, that sacrifice and love, affect how I, in turn sacrifice and love others, even those I don't like."

What would it look like for you to choose to see the cross, choose to accept it, choose to live it. But the choice is yours. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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