

“24 Hours That Changed the World”

Part 6 - The Crucifixion John 19:16-18, 23-30

April 10, 2009

It had been quite a week. It started with a grand procession into the city, and with it, a minor skirmish with the leaders in the Temple. Tensions rose when Jesus went into that Temple, a place filled with thousands of people trying to fulfill their obligation under the law, and there he literally turned everything upside down. The battle continued and escalated with questions and traps designed to discredit Jesus. And through it all, Jesus kept moving toward his destiny, frustrating the Temple leaders, and yet, giving them exactly what they wanted.

Jesus celebrated the Passover meal with his disciples, reminding them of how it all began, with a perfect lamb being sacrificed that the people might be spared from an encounter with death, and liberated from their slavery. Following that Last Supper, he went to the Garden called Gethsemane, where he prayed that he would be spared, as the children of Israel had been centuries ago. But in the end, he submitted and committed his heart and soul to the mission that lay before him, crying out, *“Not my will, but thy will be done.”* (Mark 14:36) And then it all began to fall apart. Or as the prophecies predicted, it all began to come together.

Jesus was arrested by a rent-a-mob. A kangaroo court convicted him of a capital offense. He was mocked before Herod, and twice stood before Pilate, the cruel Roman governor. In a final opportunity to avoid Roman justice, he was offered to the people. But the people chose the violence of Barabbus over the peace of Christ. When asked about what should be done with Jesus of Nazareth, the crowds answered as if they were speaking with one voice, saying, *“Crucify him! Crucify him! Crucify him!”* (Mark 15:14) And Jesus was handed over to be crucified.

Crucifixions were common in Roman history. Some accounts say that the countryside was littered with crosses. To soldiers, Jesus was just a foolish man who ended up on the wrong side of Roman law. Crucifixion was a terrible means of death. It was intended to be, not only to bring maximum pain to the victim, but also to be an example to the rest of the world. And Jesus was certainly no exemption. It began with a flogging. The whip had many tails, and in each tail was tied a little bit of stone or bone or metal. A man would be struck 39 times, and with each stroke, the whip would rip at the flesh. In *“The Passion of the Christ”*, there were many complaints that the flogging scenes were too lengthy and far too graphic. But in truth, those scenes were quite accurate. Historically, few men remained conscious through the ordeal.

After the flogging, the soldiers got mean. Some wonder why they would treat Jesus with such cruelty. After all, he meant nothing to them. They probably didn't even know who he was. And the answer is, they did it because they could. He was in their power, and they could do anything they wanted to him. After all, he was a condemned man. And so they started to mock him. In Matthew we read, *“They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a*

crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again." (Matthew 27:28-30)

The soldiers were not satisfied with beating Jesus physically. They also wanted to beat him down mentally and emotionally. The thorns in the middle east are long and nasty. Twisting thorns into a crown would not be an easy trick. Yet they did that just to make him hurt and bleed. A ruler's staff would be given to Jesus, but then quickly taken away so they could beat him with it. They would mock him by bowing before him, only to rise up to slap and hit him, even to spit on him. There was so much abuse that we can barely comprehend it.

When they tired of their sick, malicious humor, they took away the robe and gave to him a cross. Condemned prisoners were required to carry their instrument of death to the site of the execution. Even though weak and bloody, Jesus followed that tradition as long as he could. But the time came when the beating had taken its toll. And Jesus fell, at least twice. And the soldiers pulled from the crowds Simon from Cyrene, who was just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. They made Simon carry the cross. not because they had compassion on Jesus, but because it was taking too long. They were ready to get on with the crucifixion. That could take some time, and they did not want to waste all day on these three criminals.

When they arrived at Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, *"they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it."* (Mark 15:23) This was the one act of mercy on the part of the soldiers. Myrrh would be used to ease and deaden the pain. But again, it was not that they cared anything about Jesus. He would just be a little easier to handle if his pain was not too intense. But Jesus refused to drink. He chose to experience all the pain, to take part in all the suffering, because he knew that he was taking our place on the cross. Our sin was laid on his back, and his hands, and his feet, and he took it all, he went through it all for us, without anything to ease the burden.

The soldiers took off his cloak before nailing him to the cross. Understand the soldiers would typically take from the condemned whatever they wanted. They saw it as a sort tip for their service. When they took the cloak of Jesus, they saw it was all in one piece, without any seams, so to divide it would be to ruin it. So they decided to cast lots for it, not knowing that they were fulfilling prophecy. For a thousand years earlier, in Psalm 22 it was written, *"They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing."* (Psalm 22:18) It is incredible to consider that, a thousand years earlier, in a culture that had never used or even heard of crucifixion, that such an accurate depiction of the death of Jesus would be written.

Over time the abuse of the soldiers subsided only to be replaced by the abuse of the crowds. And again they were following the prophecies found in the 22nd Psalm: *"All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: 'He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him.*

Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.’“ (Psalm 22:7-8) Perhaps some of the people felt betrayed by Jesus. They had such high hopes when he came into town. They thought that maybe he was the one who could, who would restore the kingdom of David. And now he was hung on a cross. Fueled by their failed expectations, they cast all their anger and frustrations on Jesus. They cried out because they were so disappointed.

But there were others who were thrilled that this Jesus was hanging there. They believed Jesus to be nothing more than a charlatan and a fraud. Of course they never really listened to what Jesus had to say. And they would not accept the reports of miracles in his midst. These were the ones who felt vindicated over the execution of Jesus. And so they cried out in joy because they believed that justice was being done.

Though the crowd mocking Jesus was somewhat diverse, coming to him from different directions, one thing they held in common was their ignorance. They did not know; they did not understand what was really going on. And I don't want to condemn them for that because even the disciples, who should have known because they had been told by Jesus, even the disciples did not understand what was happening. And even in the church in 2009, there are many who do not understand the significance of Jesus dying on that cross. We don't think that we have done anything that bad in our lives to deserve that sort of punishment. We can find ways to justify all the unfortunate choices we have made, or the missteps we have taken. We don't even want to think of ourselves as being sinful. And yet, it was our actions that caused this death. It was our actions that caused the suffering; the beatings, the floggings, the crucifixion of Jesus.

When Jesus had borne all the pain and humiliation, when his life had been poured out, he cried out, *"It is finished."* *With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.* (John 19:30) I find it interesting that in Hebrew, the word for spirit is 'neshamah'. And 'Neshamah' can also be translated >breath'. So in a very real sense, when he breathed his last, he gave up his spirit. And understand that in crucifixion the actual cause of death is suffocation, the inability to breathe. The body just does not have the strength to rise up and take another breath; the body is crushed by its own weight. If the crucifixion took too long, and sometimes it could take days, legs would be broken so the victim could no longer push themselves up to grasp and gasp another breath. That was going to be done to Jesus, because these same Jewish leaders that wanted him crucified, also did not want him hanging on a cross during that very special Sabbath. It would be a desecration of the Passover, as though this crucifixion of the innocent Jesus did not desecrate the Passover already. But when the soldier checked, he had already given up his spirit. His breath was gone.

To make sure that Jesus was really dead, *"one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water"*. (John 19:34) The blood mixed with water was a guarantee that Jesus had indeed been dead for some time. But now that spear pierced his heart, and the last of his blood was poured out on the ground. In Leviticus we are told that *"The life of a*

creature is in the blood." (Leviticus 17:11) So with his blood poured out completely, his life was poured out, wholly and completely for us.

What does that mean for us? From Mark 15:38: "*The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.*" Behind the curtain in the Temple was the Holy of Holies, the very dwelling place of God on the earth. It was prohibited for humanity to enter that space, with the one exception that the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies to stand before the throne of God on the Day of Atonement. But now that partition that separated humanity from God had been destroyed, and we can stand before God everyday. Everyday can be a Day of Atonement because everyday we can be At One with God. And it is only possible because of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. For he took our condemnation. He suffered our death so that our penalty has now been paid, wholly and completely, so we can stand justified before God, just as if we had never sinned.

Through the passion of Christ, we have been given the gift of eternal life. But in response to that gift, we have also been given a large and important responsibility. Paul wrote, "*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: ... [He] made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant; ... he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!*" (Philippians 2:5-8)

We are called to be like Jesus. Like the one who was savagely whipped and beaten; whose life, whose blood was poured out for our sake. No wonder Peter had earlier told Jesus that he wanted no part of that suffering and death. No wonder, because he knew. He understood. He was there in that culture when crosses littered the countryside. He had seen it. He had seen the pain, the suffering, the agonizing death. And now we have seen it. Saying that I will join a church is one thing. Saying that I follow Jesus is one thing, but joining him in the struggle, joining him on the cross, allowing my life to be poured out as his had been, that is something else. It seems like it's too much, too big, too overwhelming. And even if I think about that cross, that sacrifice, I find myself pulling back and turning away. I'm not sure I want to do that. I know I don't want to do that. And yet, that is what Jesus willingly did for us. And now, we are called to him.

Many Christians around today prefer Palm Sunday to God's Friday, and I don't blame them for that. They want to take part in the parade of palms. They want to sing 'Hosanna' and shout 'Hallelujah!' But in that parade long ago, hearts were not changed, and the experience of that moment did not last. We are called not to the parade of palms, but to the procession toward the cross. We are called to join Jesus there that we might make a difference. We are called to pour out our life in his name that glory might shine in us and through us; that the grace of God might touch hearts; that the power of God might change lives; that the vision of God may become a reality in this place; that the kingdom of God may come alive here and now; that the kingdom might spring forth in you and me. That is why we come here. That is why we are called together here. And in your life, may it all be so. Amen.