

As Easter weekend approaches, we'll spend the rest of this series looking at the moments leading up to Jesus' death, the scene surrounding his crucifixion, and His resurrection.

As we've spent time looking at the gospels, it's possible that some of you might be asking questions like, *"Who is Jesus, and should I consider Him to be anything more than a good teacher or example? Why should I care about Him at all?"* Or, as a Christian, you might be wondering how Jesus' life, death, and resurrection should shape your day-to-day!

If you're asking these questions, can I plead with you to press in to the gospels and read them for yourself? If Jesus is real, and if these events actually happened, then what takes place in the weeks leading up to Easter is worthy of your closest attention and has the potential to change your life!

Toward the end of his gospel, Matthew gives us one of the most important accounts in all of Scripture to help us understand the Person of Jesus and what His life and death means for us. This is true whether you're seeking Jesus or following Him!

Look with me at Matthew chapter 26, verse 36...

"Then Jesus went with them to the olive grove called Gethsemane, and he said, 'Sit here while I go over there to pray. He took Peter and Zebedee's two sons, James and John, and he became anguished and distressed. He told them, 'My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.'" Matthew 26:36-38

When Matthew writes that Jesus became *"anguished and distressed,"* he uses a word to describe an *"intense emotional state because of something causing great surprise and perplexity."*

As Jesus walked closer and closer to the cross, he began to experience something so shocking and terrifying that it crushed his soul to the point of death!

Now...if you're familiar with the gospels, you'll remember that Jesus talked about his death often and in graphic detail. Earlier, He says to his disciples...

"Listen, we're going up to Jerusalem, where the Son of Man will be betrayed to the leading priests and the teachers of religious law. They will sentence him to die. Then they will hand him over to the Romans to be mocked, flogged with a whip, and crucified." Matthew 20:18-19

How is it, that on one hand Jesus speaks so openly about his death, but in the moments leading up to his death, he stumbles?

Someone might say... "Well, anyone can acknowledge the inevitability of death, but facing death is another thing completely. Jesus is simply coming to grips with his fate."

That might make sense, except for the fact that throughout history, many Christians have faced horrific persecution and death with remarkable courage and determination.

In Acts chapter seven, Stephen, a leader in the early church, becomes the first Christian martyr. In the moments leading up to his death, Luke writes that Stephen gazed steadily toward heaven and as he was being stoned, prayed for his persecutors, *"Lord Jesus, don't charge them with this sin."*

John Huss was a 15th century pastor who gave his life for the gospel, and was condemned and burnt at the stake by church leaders for preaching that Christ alone can forgive sins! Arriving at the place of execution, Huss was asked if he would retract his teaching! He replied...

"I have never thought nor preached except with the one intention of winning men, if possible, from their sins. Today I will gladly die." John Huss

History has it that as the flames engulfed Huss, he sang...

"Christ, Thou Son of the Living God, have mercy upon me."

Stephen, Huss, and countless others like them have gone to their deaths worshiping Jesus. But Jesus went to his death sweating blood! **To understand why, you've got to look at verse 39...**

"He went on a little farther and bowed with his face to the ground, praying, 'My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.'" Matthew 26:39

Virtually every commentator agrees that when Jesus prays... *"If possible, take this cup of suffering away from me,"* he's not merely speaking about the torturous pain that would have come by crucifixion!

Cup: Every other place in Scripture where we read about "A cup of suffering," the cup always refers to God's own judicial wrath on injustice and evil-doing.

For example, in Isaiah chapter 51, God speaks through the prophet to his rebellious people, promising to lift his hand of discipline and judgment from their backs. Isaiah writes...

"This is what the Sovereign Lord, your God and Defender, says: 'See, I have taken the terrible cup from your hands. You will drink no more of my fury.'"
Isaiah 51:22

The cup Jesus is about to drink is one of judgment!

Judgment: Now, many of us have a very difficult time with the idea of judgment, don't we? If this is true of you, my encouragement is to see that if you don't understand God's righteous anger toward sin and evil, you'll never understand the good news of His mercy and forgiveness.

If you don't get what the Bible says about the penalty of sin, you'll never appreciate the promise of pardon from sin!

If you never truly see how bad things are, your heart will never leap at the thought of how good God is!

I suggested to you last week that deep inside each of us there is a strong sense of justice. We are internally aware that a standard of right and wrong exists by which our lives and everything in the world are to be measured!

This is why...when we observe injustice, something in us rises up to defend the person being wronged!

Shawshank Redemption – If you've ever seen the movie, *Shawshank Redemption*, you'll remember that early on in the film, the main character, Andy Dufresne, is wrongly convicted for his wife's murder and spends the next nineteen years behind bars. As you watch the story play out, you find yourself hoping that Andy will be freed. In prison, he becomes friends with another man, Red, who recognizes his innocence and eventually helps him escape. At the very end of the movie, Red speaks about Andy.

"I have to remind myself that some birds aren't meant to be caged. Their feathers are just too bright. And when they fly away, the part of you that knows it was a sin to lock them up does rejoice."

"It was a sin to lock them up." You see, no one comes to the end of *Shawshank*, sees Andy on the beaches of Mexico, and says, *"Should have stayed in prison, bro!"* No, we find ourselves rejoicing because justice prevailed.

We know that justice is good, and the concept of justice isn't something we learn in school or on Sesame Street. It's in us from the moment we take our first breath...

Kids – Beth and I never sat down with our kids and said, *"Now...if you don't feel that something is going in your favor...you know, if your brother takes your toy, just start screaming 'It's not fair!'"* No, they just woke up one day and started screaming about fairness, as if it's hardwired into them.

The Bible says that this awareness of justice and fairness is not socially derived or culturally conditioned into us, but is ingrained into our hearts by our Creator.

Now...to understand the concept of justice, you must first understand what you were created for...

Narrative: According to the Bible, we are all built for God, created to enjoy his presence and a relationship with Him. When you love God and live for him with your entire self, the Bible calls this worship!

However, there isn't a single one of us who has loved God with our whole selves...including every thought, motive, attitude, and action! Have you loved Him like that?

From the very beginning, man has looked at God and said, *"I don't want you in my life! Instead, I want to do what I want, how I want, when I want."* And the Bible calls this sin!

Worship: One of the tragedies of sin is that rather than loving God, we ignore Him and worship the gifts he gives us...

We love money instead of delighting in God and his provision, and using our money as a means of worship!

Instead of enjoying sex within God's design of marriage while thanking Him for this gift of radical intimacy and oneness! We worship sex when we say, "I've got to have it in order to be someone! If I don't have sex, I won't be happy!"

We don't just value our physical health and then use our strength and energy to serve God; instead, we make health and beauty the ultimate thing! Give me Pilates, Organics, and Botox, and everything will be ok!

We don't simply delight in our work; we make work into a god, which is why some of us are exhausted and frustrated. We believe, "One more hour...one more

dollar, and my heart will rest.” See...we’re trying to find lasting fulfillment in our job instead of the God who gave us the job! But it’s not working!

All of these examples are symptoms of the sin beneath the sin, which is that in our hearts we say, *“I don’t really want God in my life...I just want his gifts. (Idolatry)*

In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul describes the effect of sin as a downward spiral in our lives...

“Since they thought it foolish to acknowledge God, he abandoned them to their foolish thinking and let them do things that should never be done. Their lives became full of every kind of wickedness, sin, greed, hate, murder, quarreling, deception, malicious behavior, and gossip. They are backstabbers, haters of God, insolent, proud, and boastful. They invent new ways of sinning, and they disobey their parents. They refuse to understand, break their promises, are heartless, and have no mercy. They know God’s justice requires that those who do these things deserve to die, yet they do them anyway.” Romans 1:28-32

Now, regardless of whether you agree with the idea of sin and divine justice, when you read this list, you’ll probably agree that people who do these things deserve to pay.

If you say, *“I’m not sure about that.”* Turn the tables... “If someone is hateful and malicious toward you...is your gut reaction to pat them on the head and say, *“Please be nice”*? Moms, if the playground bully pushes over little Johnny, are you buying the bully a popsicle from the ice cream truck? When someone you trust breaks their promise to you, or heartlessly walks away from you, are you going, *“It’s ok...happens to the best of us”*? Do you look at the greed, wickedness, and senseless evil in the world and think to yourself, *“Just wait...one day it will all get better.”*

No, that’s not how we respond to wrongdoing. We want people to pay for their offenses, don’t we?

You see the problem, don’t you? We want others to answer for their wrongdoing, but we don’t want to answer for ours. We’ll consider justice if it’s out there, but not if it knocks on our door!

Yet Paul writes, *“We know God’s justice requires that those who do these things deserve to die.”* And Paul is not referring merely to physical death. He’s talking about so much more...

We were created to live joyfully in the presence of God, but our sin has severed our relationship. As a result, we deserve to spend our entire lives apart from Him. This is

the justice Paul speaks of. This is what the Bible means when it speaks of hell...eternal separation from God.

C.S. Lewis writes...

"If in this life we never say to God, 'thy will be done,' then eventually God will say to us in the afterlife, 'All right, then thy will be done. If you want freedom from God, then you will get (quite justly) what you're wanting. And it will be torment.'"

Now...by this point, some of us are squirming in our seats and looking for an exit, because very few come to a worship gathering to have a heart-to-heart about judgment and hell! If that's you, please hear me!

Remember...I told you that if you're going to understand the beauty and good news of the cross of Christ, you must understand why Jesus went to the cross!

Go back to the garden for a moment.

When Jesus prayed to the Father three times, *"If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me."* Jesus, the perfect Son of God, wasn't simply looking at wood and nails! He was staring into the face of judgment for the first time in his life! Instead of heaven, he was looking at hell! Instead of his Father's presence, He knew that He would be cut off.

And he's saying to the Father, *"Don't let this happen!"*

Loss: If I were to lose the love of a friend, it would be painful, but if I were to lose the love of Beth or one of my children, the loss would be infinitely worse. The closer and more intimate a relationship, the more intense the pain when that relationship is severed.

Abandoned – If you've ever felt abandonment, you know that it is the ultimate hell.

Do you remember what Jesus cried out on the cross, in one of his final moments?

"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

For all of eternity, Jesus experienced a perfect, unhindered, love relationship with His Father that infinitely outweighs my love for Beth or my children.

Yet, when God the Father gave Jesus a full-view into the cross, with all of its pain, abandonment, and impending wrath, though His heart was crushed with grief, and though He could have said, “No!” He didn’t! **What did He say?**

“I want your will to be done...not mine.” 26:39

Why did Jesus go to the cross? In the book of Romans, chapter six, the Apostle Paul writes...

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Jesus knew that we are guilty of sin, and deserve God’s judgment!

Yet, He loved us so much that He wasn’t willing to let us go! Please hear me...the gospel isn’t God having pity on us and reluctantly giving us another chance! The gospel (good news) is that God died for us to give us what our hearts really need!

Listen to how Paul describes the effect of Christ’s death!

“For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God.” Romans 5:10-11

As we near Easter, let me share two things that Jesus’ death means for you and me, not only for tomorrow, but also for today! Two implications of the cross of Christ!

Application

1 - You are being pursued –

Some of you are unsure of whether Jesus is real...and you have very honest doubts about whether you’ll find Him if you do pursue Him. Some of us are terrified that if we do find Jesus, he won’t have us!

Don’t you see...the cross of Christ means that God pursued you before you took your first breath!

Stories (Movies): Love’s pursuit! The stories that captivate our hearts are the ones where love won’t stop until he finds his beloved. The prince hunts Cinderella down with the glass slipper. Romeo searches for Juliet. The stable boy hunts for his beloved, Buttercup. When we encounter these stories, our hearts are moved, and I

believe it's because we want to be pursued...we want to be loved like that! We want to be the object of someone's desire!

The cross of Christ shows you that God is on our heels! He didn't wait until we looked for him...He came for us when we were his enemies! He loved us when we were unlovable, and died to make us friends with God!

Speaking of this love...Jonathan Edwards...the 18th century New England pastor said this...

"His sorrows abounded, but his love did much more abound. Christ's soul was overwhelmed with a deluge of grief, but this was from a deluge of love to sinners in his heart sufficient to overflow the world, and overwhelm the highest mountains of its sins. Those great drops of blood that fell down to the ground were a manifestation of an ocean of love in Christ's heart."

If Jesus Christ went to the cross and took hell for you, is there anything that can separate you from his love! Is there any doubt...any struggle...any uncertainty or failure that will make him give up on you? Will he walk away because of your sordid past, or sexual sin, or addiction, or broken marriage, or inconsistency? Is Jesus going to say, *"I'll take hell for you, but I didn't see those things coming?"* No!

Only when you see him loving you in spite of these things will you be able to receive his love and be redeemed from those things! When you stand in Christ, your sin no longer defines you!

Go to him! He's already pursuing you! *"Jesus, I come to you, not on the basis of my goodness...but on the basis of your goodness!"*

2 – You will say, *"Thy Will Be Done"*

When you see Jesus Christ being crushed for you, you will realize that He not merely a good teacher to model your life after! He is a Savior; therefore, He is the Only One worth saying to...

"Not my will, but your will be done!"

- **The cross of Christ will motivate you toward whole-hearted obedience!**

The reason we have a difficult time obeying God with our whole lives is because the truth of the gospel hasn't transformed our whole life! We don't believe that God loves us fully...so we don't trust Him fully!

Encounters with Jesus
Part 7: The Obedient Master
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Place your life through the lens of the cross (generosity, sexuality, money, character, bitterness, unforgiveness).

- **The cross of Christ will motivate you toward whole-hearted repentance!**

And when you fail...go to Him! When you see Christ taking the penalty for your sin, you will come honestly with your sin!

Are there areas where you are *having a difficult time obeying Jesus?*

Go to the cross again and again! As you encounter Christ's love...you will love Him back! **Worship!**