

In the weeks leading up to Easter, we're looking at the events surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection. And we're asking the question, *"Why did Jesus die and what does His death mean for us today?"*

Regardless of whether you're a Christian or not, this question is vitally important to answer...

You see...whenever we talk about the cross of Christ, some of us think to ourselves, *"Jed, I know you say that Jesus loved me and gave his life for me, but if you really knew the kind of person I am, the kind of husband I am, the parent I am...if you knew who I am in the office or saw what I did last weekend, you'd agree that I'm not worthy of Jesus' sacrifice! Jesus died for Junior Varsity sinners...but I'm Varsity sinner material!"*

Some of us here believe that we're beneath the cross of Christ! Beneath the reach of God's mercy!

Then, there are some of us who, if honest, would say, *"I'm not really sure that I need the cross! I've got a great family, wonderful friends, a good job, financial security, and Verizon Fios. My life is pretty good...so while church is nice and the cross of Christ is comforting to think about, I don't know how relevant Jesus or his death is to my life!"*

Some of us believe that we're beneath the cross of Christ, and others believe we're beyond it! It's just not that important to us!

Now...this applies to Christians as well! Some of us have been familiar with the gospel for a long time, but if we're being honest we still live under a cloud of guilt and condemnation because of past failures or present imperfections...and though we file into a worship gathering every weekend, there is fear and restlessness instead of freedom and joy in our hearts! **And we often worry to ourselves, "At what point does God give up on me because I've exhausted His goodness and grace?"**

You can agree intellectually that God fully accepts you because of Christ crucified, but still believe in your heart that you're beneath His mercy!

In the same way, it's possible to be very religious and yet, deep in your heart live as if God loves you because you go to church, read your Bible, pay your taxes, and love your family. There are a lot of very spiritual people who find the cross comforting and inspiring but never fall to their knees in gratitude, worship, and surrender before Jesus!

Why? Because deep in our hearts, some of us believe that Christ died for really bad people, and since we're pretty good by our own estimation, we live as if we're beyond the cross of Christ!

How about you? Do you believe that you're beneath the cross today? Do you think you're beyond it? It's nice but not necessary! Or, do you realize that you're in desperate need of Christ crucified for your sins?

Today, I want to go to the gospel of Luke, chapter 23, and look at these questions through the lens of Jesus' death! And by the time we're finished, we will come around the tables of communion to remember Christ's sacrifice and celebrate it's meaning for our lives!

Every gospel writer includes Jesus' death and resurrection in their narrative, but what makes Luke's account unique is that he gives special attention to the people who stood alongside Jesus in his final moments!

Interestingly, Luke doesn't spend much time describing Jesus' friends, probably because the majority of them were off hiding behind closed doors. And he only briefly mentions the religious leaders and crowds!

Instead, Luke gives primary attention to a thief and a Roman soldier. And it's what Luke writes about them that helps us understand the meaning of Jesus' death!

Look with me at chapter 23, beginning in verse 32...

"Two others, both criminals, were led out to be executed with him. When they came to a place called the Skull, they nailed him to the cross. And the criminals were also crucified – one on his right and one on his left..." Luke 23:32-33

Matthew Green, in his commentary on Matthew's gospel, explains that when a criminal was executed, they carried a charge sheet around their necks. This was literally a board on which their crimes and transgressions were written.

Scarlet Letter: Do you remember in Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic, *The Scarlet Letter*, how after becoming pregnant with a baby that isn't her husband's, Hester Prynne is paraded through the streets with a scarlet "A" painted across her chest.

Now...guilty or not, can you imagine the shame that she would have felt? Prynne was no longer a woman with hope for a future, but an adulteress living under the scornful gaze of her neighbors and friends. And in a Puritan society, though her crime wasn't punishable by death, she was killed a thousand times over by the glares, gossip, and accusations of people who considered themselves better than she.

In the same way, the thieves hanging beside Jesus are no longer free men with a future, but walking dead men guilty of a capital crime!

Can you imagine how they must have felt?

I think we can! Maybe you've never had actual charges read out loud against you (maybe you have). Regardless, many of us carry around figurative charge sheets detailing our past decisions. Harmful words we spoke in a flash and have spent a lifetime regretting; wounds inflicted from an outburst of anger, which we've never lived down; we broke our word, lived a double life, cheated, became an addict, walked away from a marriage, compromised our integrity, had an abortion, lied to someone we love deeply.

These are some of the letters we wear across our chests every day, aren't they? For some, our charges are invisible (only we see them), but for others, we live out the consequences of our choices every day; and if this describes your story, you know what it's like to walk under a cloud of guilt, shame, or isolation, as if you're walking in a parade with everyone looking on!

And here's the thing! We tend to project how we feel about ourselves onto God and believe that he feels the same way...don't we? Like...when God looks at me, Jed, he must see on my chest a big "L" for LUST or "H" for HYPOCRITE, both of which characterized much of my life...

But is that how God sees you and me? Let's go back to the cross for a moment. Pick up in verse 39!

"One of the criminals hanging beside (Jesus) scoffed, 'So you're the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself – and us too, while you're at it. But the other criminal protested, 'Don't you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn't done anything wrong. Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom. And Jesus replied, I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.'" Luke 23:39-43

How does Jesus respond to the sorrowful criminal beside him? Does he say, "Bro...you're guilty man! for thief! Go to hell!" Does Jesus say that? No! But notice that Jesus doesn't say, "Man, Rome seriously got your charges wrong...you shouldn't be on that cross! All you did was steal something!" Jesus didn't ignore this man's crime, nor does he condemn him for it!

**Instead, Jesus looked lovingly into the eyes of a man who pleads for mercy, and says, "Today, you'll be with me!"
How can Jesus say this?**

To understand Jesus' response...you have to understand the cross! In the letter of Colossians, the Apostle Paul describes in great detail the effect of Jesus' death! Listen to what he writes...

*"You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave **all our sins**. He canceled the record of charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross."*

Colossians 2:13-14

Now...does Paul say, "Your sins really aren't that bad or offensive...just think positive thoughts? The past is the past, try harder next time...and things will get better!"

No! He writes, "You were dead because of your sins..."
"D" for Dead. How much worse can it get than dead?

Last week, we talked about this in great detail. We were made for God, to enjoy and love and live for Him with our entire lives! But we haven't done it. Our sin and wrongdoing has severed our relationship with the very One our hearts were created for! And as a result, we are guilty and deserve to pay for our crimes! **This is what Paul means when he says, "you were dead."** Unless God mercifully intervenes, we have no hope of getting back into His presence!

But...what has God done? He has made us alive with Christ. He's forgiven all our sins! **How many of our sins did he forgive? A few of our sins? The not-so-bad sins? Less offensive sins? Less destructive sins? No, He forgave all of our sins...**

How? *"He canceled the record of charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross."* 23:14

Now, let me ask you...on the cross, who took the nails and our record of charges?

Jesus did... And the prophet Isaiah, looking ahead to the cross of Christ, described Jesus' work in graphic detail! Listen closely!

"Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment for his own sins! But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's path to follow our own. Yet the Lord has laid on him the sins of us all."

Isaiah 53:4-6

On the cross, Jesus took your charge sheet! Though innocent, he became guilty to free you! Though perfect, he became defiled to make you pure in God's sight! Though whole, he was broken so you could be healed!

On the cross, Jesus wore our letters on his chest!
Listen...you might wake up on Monday believing that your past condemns you! People might even criticize or shun you. But Jesus doesn't do that! In his most agonizing hour, as blood poured from his wounds, Jesus' heart overflowed with mercy toward a criminal.

You are not beneath the cross!

There is one more interaction at the cross, which Luke records for us that shows us something powerful about the meaning of Christ's death.

Look at verse 44...

"By this time it was noon, and darkness fell across the whole land until three o'clock. The light from the sun was gone. And suddenly, the curtain in the Temple was torn down the middle. Then Jesus shouted, Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands! And with those words he breathed his last. When the Roman officer overseeing the execution saw what had happened, he worshiped God and said, surely this man was innocent."

Luke 23:44-47

It's interesting that Luke includes this detail about the Roman officer, because of all the people who would have looked at Jesus' death and remained unaffected, it should have been him!

Centurion: Roman centurions were skillfully trained killers. Death was a daily reality for them, and they inflicted it to a degree we can hardly imagine. Here was a hardened, brutal man who oversaw every moment of Jesus' death! From the cross, to the nails that were driven into his wrists and feet, to every agonizing hour that Jesus struggled for breath. He watched it all! He literally killed Jesus...

And yet...Luke writes that when the centurion saw Jesus die, he worshiped God, and Mark records in his gospel that the centurion exclaimed of Jesus, "Surely, this man was the Son of God."

For centuries, theologians have tried to understand why a trained executioner became a worshiper. It doesn't make any sense! Who needs God when you serve

under the most powerful man alive, Caesar, for the most powerful Empire on earth, Rome, and your job is to nail criminals to wood! The best anyone can guess is that there was something different about the way Jesus died than the way every other criminal died!

But maybe we're not supposed to know why the centurion was moved to worship! Maybe, all we need to know is that the first person that confessed the deity of Christ was the one who killed him...

Wrestle with that for a moment... How is it that Jesus' killer worships Jesus and gets his story in the Bible?

There is an interesting detail in the text that is easy to miss, and it comes just before the Roman Officer worships God! In verse 45, Luke writes that *"Suddenly, the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn down the middle."*

Curtain: In the temple, the curtain separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple. It was 60 feet high, and made of very thick material. For the people of Israel, the curtain was a symbol reminding them that no one could get into God's presence!

Father: As a father, any time one of my children needs to get in touch with me, they can! In fact...if I'm talking with you after the service and one of them approaches me, please don't be offended if I interrupt our conversation to listen. It's not personal...I'm their father...and they're my kids! Therefore, I'm supposed to be accessible...

We too were created to have unlimited access to our Heavenly Father. But like Israel, our sin stands as an enormous curtain between God and us! And what we need...if we're ever going to get back into our Heavenly Father's presence...is for someone to remove the curtain!

For hundreds of years, no one went into the Holy of Holies except for one man, the high priest, who entered only once a year on the Day of Atonement! On that day, the priest carried in the blood of animals as a sacrifice for the sins of the people...this went on year after year...

When Jesus showed up, John the Baptist, said of Jesus, *"Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."*

Then, at the moment of Jesus' death, Luke writes that the curtain was torn down the middle! He is telling us that Jesus' sacrifice effectively removed the curtain between humanity and God!

Only a few years later, the Apostle Paul wrote about what God accomplished through Jesus' death!

"For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross." Colossians 1:19-20

Please hear me...it doesn't matter whether you're a thief, killer, small group leader, prostitute, or pastor! Jesus Christ shed his blood to make peace between you and God. The curtain of sin that separated you from your Heavenly Father has been removed, and you can go in!

So...maybe when you came here today, the cross of Christ didn't matter that much to you! If honest, you might say that what really matters is having a nice family, working hard, financial security, living a good life! And of course those things matter! But don't you see...if they're all you have, you'll always feel (in the quietest moments) that you're living life on the other side of the veil! That there's got to be something more! Furthermore, you'll bank your entire life on something that won't go with you to the grave! Only Jesus Christ can give you true purpose, and when you know Him, you will be able to enjoy things like family, work, and money as gifts from God! And when you have those things, they add to your joy! But even if you lose them, you still have the One thing that nothing in this life can take from you! **You have the Father!**

Close

If you're still unsure of the meaning of the cross, let me give you one more visual to bring it home!

Story – Several weeks ago, I was talking with my son, Brooks...and the topic of marriage and children came up, and Brooks looked at me and said, *"I'm not going to have children until I'm like 50 because I don't want to die!"* So, I said... *"Oh...what do you mean?"* And he said, *"When you have children, you die!"* I'm thinking to myself, *"You have no idea how profound that is!"* But I didn't say that! Instead, I asked him, *"You die? What do you mean?"* And Brooks said, *"Well, whenever you have children, you get stressed."* **And I'm thinking, "What is he saying about Beth and me?"**

In reality, Brooks is on to something! True Love entails self-sacrifice! And if you really want to love someone, you must be willing to die for them. So, as parents, we know that to love and lead our children well means we've got to be willing to die! If you try to be a parent, and hang on to all of the independence you had in college and

your early 20's...you'll neglect your children! But if you love them, instead of going out, at times you stay home on Friday night; instead of having a steak, you buy diapers; instead of going to some tropical island for a week, you go to Story Land! **In a sense...you give up what once mattered to you to love the children who matter to you most!**

The gospel tells us that in Christ, God became a man, and humbled himself to death on the cross! He gave his life for what mattered to him most...you and me!

Why? Because you die for the things you love!

I don't know where you're at today! I don't know what sin you believe Jesus will never cover! What failure you believe he'll never forgive. What hurt you believe he'll never heal. Or, what doubt you believe he'll never satisfy.

What I do know is that Jesus has opened the curtain...and because of that...we can go to the Father!

Go to him! The thief went to him... The centurion worshiped God because of him! What are you waiting for!

Communion

In these last few moments, we're going to respond collectively to Christ's sacrifice for us on the cross! We're going to go to the Father together!

First time – For some of us, we're going to go for the first time! *"Jesus, please accept me on the basis of your goodness, not mine! If you love me that much, I place my life in your hands. I'm sorry for my sin, please forgive me! Thank you for removing my sin through the death of Christ, and for bringing me back!"*

100th time – Go to him – *"Thank you for accepting me on the basis of Jesus' goodness! I bring my life to you...all of me!"*

Then, be very honest with your need...honest about sin!

Finally, thank him and celebrate his work on the cross! We may come to the table with a sense of conviction, guilt, discouragement, or fear...but we always leave the table with a heart of celebration!

Encounters with Jesus
Part 8: The Bystanders
March 28th & 29th, 2015

Here, we're reminded that the charges against us have been taken away and the curtain has been removed in Christ! It's not possible to be beneath the mercy of Christ, and you can't possibly be beyond it! In the cross, we find that God has given us the very thing our hearts were created for!

Pray...