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“Crucifixion”

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Mark 15: 25-39

Today is not a traditional Palm Sunday message, but the culmination of my sermon series “24 Hours that Changed the World.” Six weeks ago we began this study as we focused on Jesus at the Last Supper with his disciples. Each week we have gone deeper into the story as we follow Jesus from the Last Supper to the Garden of Gethsemane; to the trial before the Sanhedrin; to the trial before Pontius Pilate; to the torture at the hands of the Roman soldiers and now finally we come to the end, the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus. All of this is a prelude to next Sunday, when we celebrate the resurrection.

I suspect that most of us have pictures in our minds about what happened at the crucifixion. And yet, when it comes to the details most of us really have no idea, so today I would like to teach you a bit about exactly how Jesus was crucified. I want to look at the what, where and why of the crucifixion, and then consider what it all means for us.

The Romans practiced crucifixion to intimidate their subjects. The idea was that if you saw a crucifixion you would never, ever be inclined to do what that person did.. Seneca said that if there was a likelihood that you would be crucified, it was far better to commit suicide. Cicero said it was one of the most vile and disgusting ways of putting someone to death. It was a means of agonizing torture, but it was a very effective deterrent against crime.

The Romans practiced crucifixion by torturing a victim so that their agony would be unbearable, while keeping them alive just as long as possible. Someone could actually hang on a cross for as long as two days before they finally died.

A person who was crucified was usually displayed along the main road, so that the townspeople had to walk by and see them. As we learned last week, before being crucified a person was beaten as Jesus was, then forced to carry their own cross. The vertical beam would have been left in the place of the crucifixion, while the horizontal beam would be carried and it could weigh up to 100 pounds.

The site of Jesus’ crucifixion is a hill called Calvary which is the Latin word for Golgotha, which means the place of the skull. It was called the place of the skull because it looks like a skull, but more than likely it was because many skulls were left on that hill. After someone it was crucified the body was not typically buried, but left hanging from a cross until animals devoured the flesh and then the bones may have been scattered off to the side, unless there were loved ones who would

claim them. Many of the bodies were taken and placed on a trash heap and the Romans did not allow anyone to claim the bodies. Many skulls were left at crucifixion sites, also as a deterrent.

Being nailed to a cross was a form of capital punishment which was practiced for 800 years. I have some beautiful cross necklaces that I wear, but I still find it strange that crosses are now considered a positive and even beautiful symbol of Christianity. You can buy festive milk chocolate covered crosses as symbols of Easter. Yet, in the first century the cross was a horrible symbol of torture and death. Wearing a cross around your neck then would be like wearing a swastika around your neck today—a symbol of horrible evil. Wrote George McCloud: “I am recovering the historical truth that Jesus was not actually crucified in a cathedral between 2 candles, but on a cross between 2 thieves, on the town garbage heap.” Victims of crucifixion were either nailed or roped to a cross. Most of us have a picture of what this looks like. We often picture Jesus having his feet together and a nail through both of his feet. His arms are spread on the cross and there is a nail through each hand. Usually he is depicted as having some sort of a loincloth on, but this probably was not the case. The Romans stripped people naked as a means of humiliation, and they could hang there for up to two days .

We don't know exactly how people died when they were crucified. Various physicians have researched how a person dies from crucifixion. The challenge is that you cannot determine the cause without killing someone. There have been people who are roped to a cross and stay there as long as humanely possible and then taken down and they were studied, but no one is exactly sure what the final cause of death was. Here are some ideas. Some believed that you died by asphyxiation which is what happens when you are suspended in a certain way from the cross. It was possible to breathe in but you could not exhale without raising yourself up. If that is the case, then the longer one hangs on the cross the more exhausted one becomes and the harder it was to pull oneself up to exhale. So the breathing became more and more shallow until finally one was asphyxiated and suffocated. Another idea is that there is an increase in fluids around the heart and congestive heart failure set in. Some have said that there was a loss of bodily fluids that caused dehydration which led to death, but nobody knows for sure.

What we do know is that crucifixion was a method of killing someone in the most agonizing way possible, which prolonged the dying process as long as possible. This is precisely what happened to Jesus. Josephus and other Roman historians describe crucifixion as the most pitiable of deaths. So we need to understand this.

The God who walked among us in human form as a gentle carpenter, teacher and healer, the man who healed the sick, loved the poor and ate with sinners, was accused of blasphemy against himself by the most **religious** people of his time, was sentenced to death by the most **powerful** people of his time, was beaten and stripped naked, had his feet nailed into the side of a cross, his hands roped and nailed to the front of the cross, and hung there for six hours before he died. That is what humanity did to God in the flesh.

So that is the what of crucifixion, now we will consider the where. There are two places that vie for the distinction as the site of the crucifixion in Israel. One is much more modern and it looks like the real place even though it is less likely to be so. That place was called Golgotha or the place of the skull in the Scriptures.

Photo #1 Golgotha

As you look at this rock formation you can see the image of a skull on the right. Now a bus station on top. Just below this skull hill, there is a place that is called Gordon's Calvary also known as the Garden tomb.

Photo #2 Gordon's Calvary

If you were to see it you would say that this really looks like the place where the body of Jesus was laid. This is where visitors can go inside of the tomb and see what an actual 1st century tomb was like. It is very simple and serene.

A site that has the distinction of probably being closer to the actual site is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Sepulcher means a burial vault or a place for sacred relics.

Photo #3 The Church of the Holy Sepulcher

This is the place where Christian pilgrims have gone for as long as recorded history to honor the death of Christ, in the Old City of Jerusalem.

When you go inside the church you also find what looks like a smaller chapel and this is the actual holy sepulcher—a burial vault.

Photo #4 Chapel of Holy Sepulcher

It is the place where Christians believe that Jesus was actually crucified. Inside the holy sepulcher you find an altar.

The holiest place in this building is this altar table. You get on your knees and you get underneath the altar table and you can put your hand on the top of that rock where it is said that Jesus was crucified.

Photo #5 Picture of Christ on the cross

And this is the depiction of Jesus above the altar in that chapel where some believe

the crucifixion occurred. And whether this is the precise location or not, it is still a very powerful experience. Many times we think of this as ancient history, but when you walk in these places you are overcome with the reality of this event, and magnitude of what it has meant to so many people throughout history.

So you have now learned about the what and the where of the crucifixion, now we turn to the why. Why did God in the flesh have to die such a violent, brutal death? Why did human beings kill God's love in person on earth? Why would God allow this to happen? We have been addressing that question the last few weeks by talking about the atonement. Atonement means a reparation for a wrong, to make amends. In Christian terms it means the reconciliation of God and humankind through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. There are several theories of the atonement.

One theory is substitutionary atonement, which we discussed a few weeks ago. This theory holds that we all deserved to die, a penalty that had to be paid to God, and Jesus substituted for us. As God in the flesh and the only fully righteous human being to ever live, Jesus was capable of paying the price for all humanity. Jesus stood in for us, he died in our place so that we would be free.

Another theory that has to do with sacrifice. Throughout biblical history we find that when people come to worship God they offer a sacrifice. They sacrifice grain, animals, wine, oil, a variety of things. An angry God needed to be appeased by these gifts. There were also sacrifices that were to be given to God when people sinned. These were called sin or guilt offerings. When you violated God's will you brought a special offering to be reconciled to God.

Once a year the High Priest was asked to make an offering on behalf of all the people. Even before there was a Temple there was a tent that was used for worship. Inside the tent was a place that was known as the throne room of God. It was surrounded by a curtain and inside was the Ark of the Covenant--the same Ark that Indiana Jones went after in Raiders of the Lost Ark! Once a year the high priest was to offer a bull as a sacrifice for his own sins and for the sins of his family. Then he was to take a goat inside the curtain and sacrifice that goat for the sins of all the people. He would plead with God to forgive the people's sins and remember them no more. That day every year was known as Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement. Our Jewish friends still celebrate that day every year, though without the animal sacrifice. Once the goat was offered for the sins of the people a second goat was taken and the high priest in front of all the people, so that they would know that they were forgiven, would place the sins of the people upon that goat. This became

the scapegoat. The scapegoat was taken out into the wilderness and sent away never to be seen again. The people came to understand that just as that goat had gone away never to be seen again, their sins had been carried away.

Now I have to tell you that I do not find either the substitutionary or sacrificial theories of the atonement helpful. They are not consistent with my experience of God, because they portray an angry God who needs to be appeased, a God who needs sacrifices and offerings to appease God's wrath. Of course, I do understand why ancient peoples needed to interpret the crucifixion in this way, because they believed in a vengeful God who punished them with plagues and afflictions, and this God needed to be placated. This was the God they experienced, and the same interpretation they laid upon the crucifixion of Christ.

Yet, I believe that in the crucifixion we are witnessing something else altogether. God did not require the brutal death of this gentle, lovable man in order to love us. In fact, just the reverse is true, God's love preceded the crucifixion. God loved us so much, that God completely identified with our human condition, to the point of freely experiencing the very worst experience imaginable to draw us closer to him. This is the moral or subjective theory of atonement.

This theory holds that the death of Jesus was about changing human hearts. Jesus, God's Word made flesh, suffered so that we might see the depth of God's love for us. When the most powerful people in the world took this lowly carpenter and decided to torture and kill him, that tells you something about what is wrong with humanity. When you see that nobody was willing to stand up for him, that tells something about what is wrong with humanity. In the cross Jesus was painting a picture for us of our brokenness and the extent of God's love coming our way. It was such a radical, unexpected thing to happen to God in the flesh, and in its brutality and power we see the contrast of the great love of a gentle God.

Why did the crucifixion happen? To give us a vivid glimpse of God's complete and total identification with our human condition, even to the point of death.

It is this very love, symbolized by the cross that has drawn me irresistibly to Jesus Christ. I have studied other faiths, and none of them present such a compassionate, suffering, vulnerable deity. A God who understands my struggles, my sorrows, my journey through life, a compassionate God who endured the worst the world had to offer, that is the kind of God I can serve all of my days.

Now the cross means different things at different times in your life. Sometimes you look at the cross and see your brokenness, and your need for salvation. Sometimes you look at the cross and you see God's great love and vulnerability. Sometimes

you see human suffering, and other times you see divine hope.

I am reminded that in 1937 Pablo Picasso painted a painting in response to the invasion of Spain by Hitler's forces at Guernica.

Photo #6–Guernica

Picasso created Guernica after Hitler's planes had descended upon this little village of 5000 people dropping bombs on innocent civilians with no military protection. The people of the village then ran for the fields and Hitler's planes flew low to the ground and saturated the fields with their machine guns murdering more than 1600 people. Picasso in response, painted this painting. People would ask him, "What does this mean?" Picasso said that it was up to them to decide what it means. In this painting you will see what you bring to it, you will see whatever you need to see.

I think the same is true of the cross. You are meant to look at the cross, to mediate upon it and you will eventually see what you need to see.

You are going to see different things at different times in your life.

Sometimes you'll see only sadness. Sometimes you will see forgiveness.

Other times you will see violence. Other times you will see hope and promise.

But all the time, all the time, you will see a demonstration of God's great love for you. The crucifixion of Jesus demonstrates the depth of God's love for us.

It is a wondrous love, beyond our deserving or comprehending, and it reminds us of a gentle man whose life and death literally changed the world.

