

His Death, Our Life

Matthew 27:32-44

Series: Summer Getaways: Week 6 – The Crucifixion

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It is a place that represents culture and wisdom. A paradise promising goodness and prosperity, not just for the world, but for the entire universe. The Evil one continually attempts to corrupt it but can't find a way to do so through strength and battle, thus he relies on deceit. This is Eternia's Castle Grayskull from He-Man – Masters of the Universe. And in 1987 the model of Castle Grayskull was our son Jimmy's favorite Christmas present.

Whether it is in literature or history, it isn't often that the skull represents good in our world. In Terry Brook's book, "The Sword of Shannara", Skull Mountain is the name of the fortress the dreaded Warlock Lord lives with his Skullbearer henchmen. Early in the 1700's pirates used the Jolly Roger to identify themselves. The raising of the red flag signaled no quarter would be given. And of course, the skull has been used throughout history to warn of poisons. But are you aware of the place of the skull in our Christian faith? Fittingly, it is at:

The Crucifixion of Jesus

³² As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. ³³ They came to a place called Golgotha (which means "the place of the skull").

The place of the skull – Where the Romans took Jesus to die by crucifixion. If you read history you might think, so what? The Romans crucified many people. Thieves and bandits. Rapists and murderers. Political revolutionaries and religious agitators. But the crucifixion of Jesus was very different, for multiple reasons.

1. Innocence – As a rule, even the Romans didn't go around crucifying innocent people. Crucifixion was reserved for the worst of the criminals. And yet they crucified Jesus, an innocent man. Even Pilate says so.

¹³ Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, ¹⁴ and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. ¹⁵ Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. ¹⁶ Therefore, I will punish him and then release him." - Luke 23:13-16

2. Brutalness - Crucifixion is a horrible death in any circumstances. Nailed through the hands or wrists into the crossbeam, with the feet nailed into the upright pole. Then left to hang there, exposed to the elements until your body eventually dies from asphyxiation. And all of this after a whipping by the Romans, probably with a cat o' nine tails where the cords on the whip were interwoven with small bones to inflict even more damage. But the beating Jesus took must have been even more severe than usual. How can we assume that? The condemned would be forced to carry their crossbeam to their own execution. (Probably not the whole cross contrary to renderings and movies over the years). And yet, in 3 of the 4 gospels, we read that Simon of Cyrene is forced to carry Jesus' cross. Could it be that Jesus was beaten so badly he simply didn't have the strength to carry it?
Remember, the complement to the "fully God" statement is that Jesus is "fully human".

3. Choice – Given a choice of how you are going to die, would any of you select crucifixion? I don't think so. God does. The Father makes the choice. Jesus accepts it. He would prefer another option - ⁴²“Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” - Luke 22:42 – but he accepts it.

But there is even more where we talk about a choice.

³⁴ There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it.

Why refuse to drink it? There are two theories on what this mixture can produce. One theory is the mixture creates a poison which could quicken the time to death. The other suggest it would work as an anesthetic and would reduce suffering. It's almost as if Jesus doesn't wish to allow his suffering to be reduced. Why? Let's read on.

³⁵ When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. ³⁶ And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. ³⁷ Above his head they placed the written charge against him: this is Jesus, the king of the Jews. ³⁸ Two rebels were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁹ Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads ⁴⁰ and saying, “You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross if you are the Son of God!”

As we often see, the people hurling the insults get it wrong. It is a typical “whisper down the lane” situation. John writes,

¹⁸ The Jews then responded to him, “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” - John 2:19

The mockers misquote Jesus's earlier words. He doesn't say HE will destroy the Temple. He tells the Jews to destroy the temple – and he will rebuild it.

⁴¹ In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. ⁴² “He saved others,” they said, “but he can't save himself! He's the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. ⁴³ He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” ⁴⁴ In the same way the rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him. - Matthew 27:41-44

Herein lies the part the priests, lawyers, and elders JUST DON'T GET.

“He saved others,” they said, “but he can't save himself!... - Matthew 27:42

Jesus isn't there to save himself. Like they said, “He saved others...” And it isn't just past tense. He came to earth to save us. He died so that we may live.

²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, ^[a] because he will save his people from their sins.” – Matthew 1:21

Why is it so important to be saved from our sins? We were created to enjoy a relationship with God. Our sins are an obstacle to the relationship. Isaiah writes, “But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.” Isaiah 59:2. How do

we avoid that separation from God? For starters, we can stop sinning. Personally, I find many a day where this doesn't seem to be a problem. I even found a prayer to give me more strength in those days. It goes like this.

Dear Lord,

So far, I've done all right today. I haven't gossiped, haven't lost my temper, haven't been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, or overindulgent. I'm really glad about that. But in a few minutes, God, I'm going to get out of bed. And from then on, I'm going to need a lot more help. Amen

Sometimes we forget how wide-ranging our sins can be. We run down the list in the 10 Commandments and think we're ok. We tend to ignore the day-to-day sins that add up.

⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
– Romans 5:8

Why is it necessary for Jesus to die to save us? There must be a reason because we know God is a compassionate God. Prior to Jesus the Israelites offered animal sacrifices to atone for their sins. The Day of Atonement was when the High Priest offered a sacrifice of two goats for the entire Jewish nation. During the rest of the year when somebody needed to approach God for something, additional sin offerings were made. Do you see the problem here? Look at our own lives. We are told we should continue to reach out to God – we should pray unceasingly. Seems like a never-ending cycle. Sin, sacrifice, pray. Repeat. Now do you see the problem?

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. ² Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. ³ But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. ⁴ It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. - Hebrews 10:1-4

But God can't just ignore our sin. Sin is evil and must be punished. To let us continue to sin with no consequence would be the same as accepting the evil. So God became human so that he could save us. His death, his blood, is the difference. The death of an animal sacrifice would cover our sins – but they are still there. Jesus is the perfect lamb. He has no sin, no reason to offer a sacrifice. The key point to Jesus's death, a willing sacrifice, was in dying he didn't simply cover our sins, he took on all our sins. And he didn't just take on our sins – he forgave us for it.

³⁴ Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."^[a] And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. - Luke 23:34

And let me make one thing very clear here. I know the Jewish leaders turned him over to the Romans. The people of Jerusalem mocked him and refused Pilate's offer to release him. And the Roman soldiers killed him. But when he says, "forgive them", he isn't only referring to them. He took on ALL of OUR sins. Including yours, and mine.

Why would he do that?

⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. – John 3:16

God loves us so much, he wants to have a relationship with us despite knowing what is going on in us, here, and here. And he wants that relationship to be eternal.

So, what is our part in this? What is required from us? It's important to be clear of one thing.

⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹not by works, so that no one can boast. - Ephesians 2:8-9

We can't earn that grace. Our works are not needed for grace to be given us. But there is one step that is necessary, and two others we come to find we want to do.

- Accept the Gift – It's a simple thing. You have been given a gift. Take it. As it says in John 3:16 - whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. Paul writes, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Romans 10:13. Turn your life over to God and accept Jesus as your savior.
- Share it With Others – You've been given this great gift. It may have changed your life or is in the process of changing your life. Wouldn't you want others to receive that same opportunity? And what is especially great, is sharing his love with others doesn't reduce the amount of God's love you receive. God's love is inexhaustible. The joy you get from sharing his love is like opening a gift and finding another gift inside. I'm not suggesting anything big and scary. It can be simple. When I came back to faith in 2006, one of the things I did early on was take the Alpha course. A ten-week introduction to the Christian faith. Sometimes friends would ask if I wanted to do something on a Sunday night. I'd reply, "Michelle and I are busy." But it wasn't long before I began sharing what we were busy doing. For those who have ever received an e-mail from me, you know I end my e-mails with, "Say a prayer for somebody today." Whether it's family, friends, ministry, or business. That line has started any number of conversations.
- Give Thanks – Remember what Jesus did for you and thank him. Regularly. A lot. Thank him when you wake up in the morning and when you go to bed at night. Thank him for your loved ones and what they mean to you. Thank him for work, school, food and weather. And especially thank him for the sacrifice he made for you. Next week is the first Sunday of the month and we will be serving Communion. When Doug says, "This is my body, which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of me." Think about that broken body, remember, and give special thanks. When he says, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins; all of you, drink of it, in remembrance of me." Remember - His blood has washed away your sins, and you now have eternal life.

Last Sunday as we drove home after Linda's vivid description and teaching around the Transfiguration, Michelle asked what my message was going to be about today. I paused and then said, "death." "That's uplifting" she replied. She then asked what passage I was using. I said, "uhm, the Crucifixion." "Not really a summer getaway to celebrate, is it?", she responded.

It's kind of strange the way we celebrate some things. Crucifixion might be the most vicious method of execution man has devised. And yet we have crosses on our walls, in our stained glass, and around our neck. We refer to the day Christ died as "Good Friday". It wasn't a great day for Jesus. It was a wonderful day for us. When we think of Golgotha, Calvary, the place of the skull, we don't usually think of it as a place to celebrate. Next time you do think about it, remember, "His Death, Our Life". See if that makes sense.