

Good Friday, March 25, 2016

Meditation #1

Luke 23:33 says, "And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on His right and one on His left." It was not just the religious leaders or the soldiers that mocked Jesus, even one of the criminals derided Him. What we see unfold is a downward progression of mockery. The crowds around the cross were representatives of all kinds of people. There were the proud, the self-righteous, the scoffers, and mockers. There were people sympathetic to Jesus. They were all there by choice. But then there were two others who were not there by choice; they were suffering the same punishment as Jesus, though for a different reason. They were convicted criminals whose life choices put them in this situation. The one criminal mocked Jesus from the cross. He died with cursing on his lips ... a horrible way to die! But the other criminal spoke up for Jesus. We are receiving what we deserve, but "this man has done nothing wrong."

Where did his change of heart come from? His heart was changed by the power of the cross. He had heard the first word of Jesus ... a prayer for forgiveness and it led him to pray, "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*" (Luke 23:42). He confessed his sin and unworthiness, and he heard those blessed words of absolution ... today, you will be with me in paradise.

Isaiah 53:12 says that Jesus would be numbered with the transgressors, and indeed, He died on a hill between two thieves. These two stand, or rather hang there representing all humanity. They are both convicted sinners. They are both helpless sinners. They represent all of us. All of us have all rebelled against God. We are all guilty of sin and deserving of death. Yet one of the criminals being crucified was saved. When Jesus prayed for forgiveness for those who crucified Him, it touched his heart and planted a seed of hope. Perhaps he could pray for me too, that somehow I might be forgiven. Jesus' response is a comfort to us. This man did not plead his works or any righteousness of his own. He had none. He had wasted away his life in crime and was now receiving the just reward of his deeds. "*The wages of sin is death*" (Rom. 6:23). He could bring nothing of worth to buy God's love nor did he need to. Salvation is by grace through faith without the deeds of the Law. The gift of salvation is not earned; it is given.

Jesus says to the penitent thief, "*Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*" He had once said, "*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself*" (John 12:32). Now Jesus declares this criminal to be one who was drawn to Him by the power of the Gospel. Jesus was nailed to the cross and He was physically dying, and yet the devil could not stop Jesus from reaching out to the unsaved and offering them forgiveness and eternal salvation with Him in paradise. Truly it is in death that Jesus brings eternal life. And after the thief received forgiveness and assurance of salvation, he could die as countless saints before him.

What a way to die! "*Today you will be with me in paradise.*" Think about those words. Today ... with Jesus ... in paradise. How blessed is the death of the saints. How great the breadth and depth of the grace of God! How wonderful to be like John Neill and Anette Boilesen and Daphne Miller and James Ruttkay who celebrate this Easter in heaven. Let us not wonder how this evil man could be shown such grace. We thank God that grace was so rich to even include a dying thief, for then it will surely include us because in the end, our sins against the Lord are every bit as dark, even if not as spectacular.

There is much encouragement here for us. Jesus promised that this criminal would be with Him in paradise. There is no reason to believe this man had previously been a follower of Jesus. His cry to be remembered was his only statement of repentance and faith, but it showed true faith. He believed that Jesus was who He claimed to be. He believed that death would not hold Jesus or prevent Him from coming into an eternal kingdom and he wanted to be included in that kingdom. In the end, our relationship with Jesus comes down to simple child-like trust. Jesus, remember me. And Jesus says to us, "*You will be with me in paradise.*" We are welcome there not because we are living rightly, but because God is merciful and we have put our trust in Jesus.

Meditation #2

As Jesus hung upon the cross, crowds hung out around the cross. Consider who was there. There was a dwindling number of disciples. There were secret followers. There were the mockers and scoffers. Jesus and Mary are together again, at the beginning of His ministry in Cana and now at the end of His public ministry at the foot of the Cross. The sight of Jesus hanging upon the cross and the sound of evil voices mocking her Son surely brought to Mary's mind the prophecy of Simeon when he blessed them. Simeon had said to Mary, "*Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.*"

The name 'Mary' means 'bitter'. Here at the cross she tasted the bitterness of the helplessness of a mother who could neither take the place of her Son nor alleviate His suffering. She tasted bitter sorrow as a sword figuratively pierced through her very soul. How great is a mother's love and yet, we see something greater here. Greater than the love of a mother is the love of Jesus for His mother. Greater than the love of a mother, is the love of Jesus for you. Jesus suffers so because He is her Saviour and He is your Saviour too. In His last hours, Jesus did not forget His mother but provided a protector for her. Here He provides her with another 'son'. He said to His mother, "*Woman, behold your son!*" As Jesus becomes her Saviour, Mary can now lean on John as a son. And John is given a gift as well. John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was also in need of support. "*Then He said to the disciple (John), 'Behold, your mother!'* And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home."

There are two things to see here. Jesus continues to keep God's commandment of 'honoring His father and mother' by arranging for His mother's future care and needs. There is also a spiritual picture here. God's church is pictured as a woman. The church is the 'bride of Christ'. Jesus is the Bridegroom and has already arranged for the marriage feast. Now He is arranging for the church's protection until He comes again to take us to Himself in heaven. Just as Jesus shows care, compassion, and concern for His earthly mother, so He likewise shows that He loves his church and protects it until He comes again. As Christians, we are all members of His body the church. We are all His family, and He appoints us to watch after one another. In these verses we are called to think of the crucifixion of Jesus from the perspective of His mother. The death of a child is one of the most painful of all parental experiences. To watch your child suffer is something that no parent ever wants to endure. You would much rather take your child's place and suffer for them.

And yet here, God's grace turns things around. The love of Jesus for fallen sinners is greater than the love of a parent. Our welfare is a constant and abiding concern of our Savior. He knows our pain and sorrow, even in His own. He dies on the cross in our place to forgive us our sin and win heaven for us. And then He gives us even more. He helps and strengthens and encourages us through our relationships with one another in the body of Christ that we call the church. We do not live on an island. Here at the cross, we learn to appreciate the mutual love and care that exists within a fellowship of believers. As we carry each other's burdens, we learn about the responsibility that members of the body of Christ are to have for one another. If in His deepest suffering Jesus loved His own so much that He would provide for their mutual welfare, then we also ought to care for and love one another. When you do that you are reflecting Jesus' love to your neighbor.

Meditation #3

The reality of the Father's love in promising a Savior overwhelms us. When in repentance and true faith we realize what was lost by the sin of Adam and Eve, when we recognize the on-going nature of sin in our own life, then everything that Jesus has done for us begins to overwhelm us.

Did you know that besides being Good Friday, this day on the church calendar, March 25th, is also the celebration of the annunciation of our Lord? It's the day that the angel Gabriel came to Mary and told her that she would be the mother of the Saviour. It's the day Mary became pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit. Do the math. Nine months from now is December 25th. Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit. He will be born of the Virgin Mary. We believe this and rejoice in it for it declares to us that Jesus is without sin. Anyone born the natural way is a natural born sinner, descended from sinful parents. You won't find a Saviour among the children of men. Jesus had to be both True God and True Man in order to live a life that was perfectly obedient to the Father and lay down His life as a ransom for many. That was His mission. That is why He was born and that is the message of the Bible from cover to cover. God himself will take on human form and come and redeem His creation.

It was at three o'clock in the afternoon, the very hour when the lambs for the evening sacrifice were slain that Jesus said, "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*" That is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why does he cry out so? What is weighing upon Him so heavily that even the Son of God comes to the brink of utter despair? Jesus here experiences the full weight of our sins and the ultimate separation and abandonment from God that they cause. In this afternoon hour as the sun grows dark, Jesus is forsaken by His Father. That is, in the final analysis, the ultimate consequence of sin, to be eternally abandoned by the God who lovingly created you, to live endlessly in a universe of nothing.

Do you think Jesus cried out because the nails hurt his feet or the thorns His brow? Do you think His agony came from the bleeding sores on His back? In these hours, He is carrying the combined suffering for all sin for all time. This is the Passover and Jesus is the Lamb, and His blood will keep us safe. Jesus is forsaken by God for us. He is the true Passover Lamb. The deepest, most profound picture of the enormity of sin, is expressed in these words. The eternal Son of God becomes the lightning rod and is forsaken by His Father. Hell, in the real sense, is being forsaken by God. Being forsaken by God is the epitome of punishment. So great is the Father's love for us that He forsook His own Son! Who can grasp it? Penitent sinners cannot fully grasp it but are thankful for it.

When Jesus asks this question, He points us to the reality of His suffering and shame. What He endured was not a charade. He is not just playing the part as a good actor. This is real! When He asks why, He wants us to look for the answer in the heart of the Father. Our Father in heaven is determined to provide a means of reconciliation with sinful humanity. He will not let Genesis 3 stand. He will not let the devil win. He will not see His creation lost forever. But what will this rescue mission cost? Jesus willingly suffered this separation from the Father so that none who believe in His atonement will be required to suffer this separation from God. We are here reconciled to God through the merits of the Lord Jesus. Now we have peace with God.

As Christians, we believe that the Father forsook His Son in order that the Father will not forsake us. Jesus was abandoned and forsaken so that we might be reconciled and redeemed. He did it all for us. Even in His dying words, Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. He quoted the beginning of Psalm 22, "*My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Why are You so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but You do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest*", (Psalm 22:1-2).

Why did God abandon Jesus? Why did the Father turn His back on Jesus in His moment of greatest agony? Was it because His own sins separated Him from His Father? Absolutely not! It was because Jesus became sin for us. In taking on our sins, He experienced the complete separation, isolation, abandonment, and forsakenness of humanity because of Adam and Eve's sin. For the first time in His earthly life, Jesus experienced the end result of sin – abandonment by the Father. The suffering of separation from the Father was a far greater pain and punishment than physically dying on the cross.

The reality is this ... all those who die in their sins without the blood of Jesus to cover them and make them acceptable to the Father, face eternal abandonment. They face eternity in outer darkness forsaken by God and alienated from all that is good and all that is life. This is what Jesus experienced for our sakes. He took upon Himself the complete penalty for sin – abandonment by God. "*For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*".

Meditation #4

The Bible says “*The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*”, (Romans 6:23). It also says, “*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*”

That is why this is a Good Friday. It is a very good Friday. We thank God because “*It is finished.*” Jesus had become human to live a perfectly sinless life and die on the cross as the Lamb of God. “*He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*”

The Greek word translated as ‘finished’ (tetelestai) has a wealth of information for us to see and to cling to. This word means that everything has been accomplished; the price of rebellion has been paid in full. There is nothing more that needs to be done to redeem humanity from its lost and condemned situation. Christ has once and for all satisfied God’s justice by dying for all to pay for the sins of all people of all time. There is no double jeopardy. Once paid for, these sins can never be punished again since that would violate God’s justice. You can’t exact payment twice for the same debt. Sins can only be punished once, either by a substitute or by the one who sinned. It is finished. Everything foretold about and necessary for our salvation is complete! There are no works, no penance, no blood, no money, nothing more necessary, unless ... you don’t believe what “finished” really means.

As comforting as it is to believe that Jesus has paid the full price for our salvation when He died upon the cross, it is also so sad when people remain comfortless and burdened because they believe that they have to *do something* to complete what Jesus already declared *done*. Jesus said to His disciples, “*See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished.*” “*It is finished.*” tells us that Jesus is true to His Word.

God’s holiness and justice demanded payment for sin. “*And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”*” Jesus made that payment for all sinners. Those who try to add to or complete the work of Christ instead of accepting in faith the finished work of Jesus that justifies the ungodly, make Christ a liar. They lose for themselves this message of comfort and assurance: “*It is finished!*”

Your sins have totally and permanently been paid for. When Jesus said “*It is finished*”, He declared that He had accomplished His mission. He had paid the price for rebellion and sin that we could never pay. He had announced and brought in the Kingdom of God. He had revealed the love and grace of God. He opened up the way for all to live under the reign of God. On the cross, Jesus restored fallen humanity to fellowship with the Creator God. Christ’s mission was a total success; this is wonderful news! Because Jesus finished His work of salvation, you and I don’t need to add to it. In fact, we can’t add to it. He accomplished what we never could, taking our sin upon Himself, and giving us His life in return. Jesus finished the work for which He had been sent, and we are the beneficiaries of what He did. Because of what He finished, you and I are never lost. We have hope for this life and for the next. We know that nothing can separate us from God’s love. One day, what God has begun in us will also be brought to completion by His grace. Until that day, we live in the confidence of Jesus’ cry of victory: “*It is finished!*”

Jesus accomplished everything He came to do. Why did He come? “*For God so loved the world, that he gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.*” Can we have everlasting life? Absolutely! Christ made it possible.