

EASTER 2018
EASTER THEMES
Luke 23:32-43

Please follow along as I read.

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 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. And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

I suppose that living here in South Florida means that we miss some of the natural significance of Easter. You know, “Spring is here. We have survived the long, hard, cold winter, the long, dark nights.” I think our world is a little upside down, right? We survived the summer and hurricane season and the wet season. But we understand that there is a significance to spring. It’s about more than how we can wear white and springy colors now. It’s about more than hunting Easter eggs. I was amazed to discover last night all the kids in my neighborhood were out hunting down Easter eggs at night. They now have glow-in-the-dark eggs. They didn’t have that when I was little.

We understand that these are symbols and that they should direct our attention to something that they represent -- something that is eternal, something that’s found in Christ -- the life of God -- eternal life that is ours in Jesus Christ. To lay ahold of these themes today, we want to look at the text we just read, where Jesus is crucified. We read and understand what Jesus accomplishes in the resurrection because of what took place on the cross. Jesus emerged from the tomb victorious,

and we understand what that victory means because we see what Jesus took into the grave with him. The crucifixion and the resurrection provide some essential themes for us. We are going to look at three themes today: forgiveness, salvation, and a kingdom. Let's look at the first theme.

I. Jesus provides forgiveness.

Jesus provides forgiveness in the crucifixion and resurrection. We see this in verses 32 to 34. Jesus was crucified between two criminals. He himself, though he is completely innocent, is treated as a criminal. And in the midst of this injustice Jesus offers, amazingly, a prayer of forgiveness for his executioners. In doing so, he is demonstrating, he is teaching us about the heart of God, about the purposes of God, and that Jesus, through his death and through his resurrection provides forgiveness for those who don't deserve it.

Jesus is crucified at a place called The Skull, Golgotha. It's called this because the rock protruding from the hill formed the shape of a skull. But fittingly, it sets the scene as a place of forsakenness. There Jesus is crucified. Crucifixion was not simply a means of execution, not simply a means of tremendous human suffering, the infliction of pain, but it was designed and intended to humiliate, to expose. The victim was completely stripped of all clothing and mocked and displayed as he helplessly suffered.

We want to understand that Jesus' death is more than just a death. God is teaching us about our need for forgiveness, about how sin dehumanizes us, how our separation from God results in a disfigurement, if you will. 2 Corinthians 5:21: For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin..." Jesus was completely innocent. How do we understand the mystery of this statement in 2 Corinthians 5:21? He becomes sin. Perfect humanity, Jesus, now offers forgiveness for his executioners.

In all honesty, I have to tell you that I find Jesus' prayer on the cross somewhat troubling. He prays for his executioners to be forgiven, stating that they know not what they do. I want to say, "They don't know what they do? Don't they have some understanding? Aren't those crying out for the crucifixion and those mocking Jesus and the leaders of Israel and the leaders of Rome - aren't all of these parties complicit in the execution of a completely innocent person? Do they really not understand what they are doing?"

Yet, clearly Jesus means what he prays. There is something significant for us to lay hold of here. On the one hand, they don't understand the significance of who Jesus is and the fullness of what's transpiring. But Jesus is not offering just a passing prayer. He is making an argument. He is presenting a case. He is pleading for their forgiveness. That's why he is on the cross.

Forgiveness, sin, our need for forgiveness – these are not happy themes. These are not even themes that we readily embrace. They are certainly not currently popular themes.

When our children were little, we would require them to ask for forgiveness when they hurt one another. Every two or three years one of them would do something horrible and offend the other. We would say, "Okay, you have to ask for forgiveness." They would say, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it." One is an emotional response and the other is a complete lie, right?

Looking back, I think we probably overdid it. Maybe we were even at times a little legalistic. We would make them say, "Please forgive me." Then we would make them state the offense. We would use this language. It was like they were on trial. They'd say, "Please forgive me." Then: "State the offense." The offended party would chime in: "State the offense!" We were raising little Pharisees so well.

I'm pretty sure they generally didn't mean it in their hearts at all. The offended party would have to say, "I forgive you." I think it's a good practice, but what we were after there is: "You know, you have offended someone and you have to own that." And the offended party has to release it, let it go. There is a debt that has to be erased.

Scripture is very plain about this. Though we more and more find ourselves wanting to move away from this idea, it's very fundamental and basic in terms of what the scripture teaches. Ancient prophecy given hundreds of years before Jesus' death from the prophet Isaiah: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned--every one--to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Romans 3:23: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Jesus, there, carries our sin to the cross so that he might provide forgiveness.

He is crucified between two criminals, and this is in part a very direct fulfillment of prophecy. He is being numbered amongst sinners, amongst transgressors. Again, Isaiah 53, verse 12, he "was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many." Jesus is crucified between two criminals because he is taking his place with sinful humanity to identify with us, to carry the penalty of our sins so that forgiveness might be provided.

At the end of this section of scripture, in verse 34, we are told that lots were cast for his garments. It's a little detail that also pushes back to a prophecy found in Psalm 22. Psalm 22 is a portrayal of the innocent being persecuted by the ungodly. It's prophetic, speaking of Jesus. This is part of the remarkable love of God and the miracle of Easter. Jesus comes to provide forgiveness for his enemies, for those who are persecuting the innocent. So we find this reference back to this ancient psalm. It's more than just degrading. Here is Jesus identifying with all of the lostness of humanity in order to provide forgiveness.

In this first point, it's rather simple, but so important. If we look at Jesus and say, "Well, I've really done nothing that needs forgiveness," then we don't need Jesus. Or at least, according to our own awareness we don't. Most typically, as the Spirit of God visits our hearts, his second movement in our hearts is to convict us of sin. Second? Yeah, second. The first movement of the Spirit of God is to begin to reveal who God is. There is this simple little progression. It works in this manner. We begin to behold God in his glory and then we are no longer comparing ourselves to other people. The foundation which we use to provide self-justification is removed when we see the glory of God. Immediately following, almost like one event, we begin to be aware of our own need for cleansing. So, Jesus provides forgiveness. Secondly, Jesus provides salvation.

II. Jesus provides salvation.

He is mocked here on the cross repeatedly. He is mocked as the savior. He is taunted and told to save himself. He is mocked as a king, as a ruler. The implication is, "Hey, if you can't save yourself, how can you save others?" Jesus is rejected so that he can provide acceptance. Of course, the point here, and there is a deep, deep irony about what's happening, is that Jesus doesn't save himself so that he can save others.

Our first point is forgiveness, but we don't stop at forgiveness. We can't stop with forgiveness, because forgiveness is a complicated thing.

When I was single, going to college, going to seminary, I had various guy roommates, and there would be occasional conflict. The way it generally worked is, we would have a little spat and then quickly move on. It was kind of the way things were. Then I got married, and in marriage, once in a while I would do some things that were bad, that were wrong. In my eyes they weren't a big deal

and something we should move on quickly from, right? I was even quite willing to say, “Hey, I’m sorry.” Little pat on the back, let’s move on. But she’s not moving. A biblical counselor helped me see this by saying, “Well, Brian, there’s more going on here. First of all, you are emotionally processing things differently. Here you are. You’ve hurt her. You’ve wounded her. You’ve offended her (whatever word we want to use). She has not even absorbed the impact of that and you’re just saying, ‘I’m sorry,’ like nothing happened and moving right through it.” Easy forgiveness doesn’t work.

Then, on a deeper level (just staying with that personal illustration) after a while she is looking for more than just, “I’m sorry,” or “Please forgive me.” She is looking for some evidence that you really mean it. Right? Wives are shaking their heads right now. She is looking for some sense that this is sincere, that you are working on it. When you then take that out to a greater level, not to minimize my sin, but that’s trivial in light of genocide, in light of school shootings. Right? We don’t just stand up 15 minutes later and say, “Hey, we forgive you.” Because it’s a betrayal of everything we are feeling. It’s a betrayal of our emotions. It’s not honest.

We wrestle with: “Okay, I know that unforgiveness will eat me away. I know that I can’t allow this bitterness and hatred. I need resolution. I need to be able to release this.” Forgiveness is complicated. We need more than forgiveness. We need a savior. We need salvation. We need someone who takes on sin and the death that it brings and the cycle of destruction that is unleashed through its power.

Desmond Tutu led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for South Africa. He wrestled with this whole idea of how a nation deals with the atrocities of her past – multifaceted atrocities. There is a need to move on. There is a need for reconciliation, but it is also very difficult to deal with the weight and seriousness of what has transpired. In an interview, Desmond Tutu said, “As a victim of injustice and oppression, you lose your sense of worth as a person. You lose your dignity.” Sin dehumanizes. It dehumanizes the people that we sin against. But then isn’t it also true that it makes us less human? It disfigures the oppressor as well.

Some people have said that Dostoevsky’s novel Crime and Punishment is the greatest novel of all time. I have no idea how you decide that, but it’s a great work. His main character, Raskolnikov, was a young man who decided to commit a murder. He plans this perfect murder. The victim is an elderly pawnbroker. She is a moneylender and not a good person. You almost want to see her

eliminated, like the world would be better off without her. That's the justification that's provided. He is going to take the gains from the robbery and use it to help some family members and to do good.

So he does commit this murder, but it's gruesome. There is an evil that comes out in the act. It's a vivid picture of how we tell ourselves that sin isn't that big a deal, and we justify it. But eventually it shows itself for what it is. The half-sister of the victim stumbles onto the crime, and then he murders her. Again, a picture of how sin spreads. One murder quickly becomes two. Raskolnikov goes forward, tries to put it behind him, but it just eats at him.

He falls in love with a young woman named Sonya, who has become a prostitute. Sonya is a prostitute out of desperation. She is providing for her family. He falls in love with her and she knew the victims of this crime. She was friends with the elderly moneylender. So, as this eats at the main character, he eventually confesses his crimes to Sonya. Her response is so vivid. She just breaks down, weeping bitterly. She says, "What have you done to yourself?! You now, of all people, will be the most unhappy." Dostoevsky is showing us through these characters that our sin not only impacts others, but it impacts us so deeply.

Then in an unusual twist, you think, "Okay, this main character is sort of redemptive now." He's trying to redeem himself from his past acts. He is saving this woman out of prostitution. But it's a bit of a flip. She actually is the redeemer in the picture. She tells him, "Listen, you have to face this. You cannot run from this. You have to confess it." She leads him to confess his crime, which he does. Then she promises, "I will go with you to prison," and journeys with him to Siberia, to prison.

The picture illustrates how the depth of our brokenness affects us in society. Scripture phrases it like this: "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus, our Lord." Jesus brings to us forgiveness, but he also brings to us salvation. Salvation from sin, from its death, from the cycle of destruction, and listen -- also from the wrath of God. The wrath of God?

What kind of God would God be if he were not incensed against evil and the destruction that it brings? But Jesus bears the weight of our sin, the penalty. He breaks its power on the cross and when he emerges then in victory from the grave. Jesus provides forgiveness. He provides salvation and...

III. Jesus provides a kingdom.

You have this mocking that builds through the narrative. Jesus is mocked by the religious leaders. He is mocked by the soldiers. In fact, the scene is really one where he is offered wine. There is some debate over exactly what's happening when this sour wine is offered to Jesus. It has been typically believed that that was somehow an expression of mercy – to numb the pain, to help with the thirst, to prolong this person's life a little bit, not that that in and of itself would be merciful. But it's very clear, as Luke tells the story, that they were mocking him. They were mocking him as a supposed king, like, "Here's your royal wine." Then Luke makes a point of telling us that the inscription over his head is: "The King of the Jews."

In the midst of this cascading, building of mockery over this theme, the thief comes out with this stunning confession: "I want to be with you in your kingdom. You are the real king. You are the one, true king." He sees who Jesus is. He rebukes the other criminal. He tells him, "Listen, we deserve this condemnation. We deserve what we're getting." Do you see what he's modeling for us? Luke is holding him up as: "Here's what you do with Jesus. You receive forgiveness. You receive salvation. You admit your sin. You confess it and trust in Christ and receive salvation."

Then there is this kingdom. We are not just saved from something, we are saved to something. We are saved to paradise. We are saved to eternal life. I use the word "kingdom" here because we are taking it right from the text, right from the lips of the thief. It's marvelous. It's this glorious picture of the salvation that is ours in Jesus Christ and the promise of a kingdom.

Scripture teaches us through the resurrection that this kingdom is not just spiritual, but there is a redeeming of matter. There is a redeeming of the material. There is a redeeming of creation that happens through the cross and the resurrection.

This is very important for us, because I think if we picture heaven and think, "Well, I'll never have a body, and I'll just be like a spirit, a ghost, floating about, playing a musical instrument and wearing a long, white robe," it's not how I want to spend my Saturdays. Right? I understand being caught up in worship. Maybe it's a depiction of that, but scripture's emphasis is that no, there will be new heavens and a new earth and creation that is ours.

Friends, gather the significance of this – that what is taught to us on the cross is redemption for anyone who will come to Christ. Really, if you picture that scene as it's happening and you just turn

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the volume off for a moment, the last person you expect to be redeemed is the thief that hangs next to Jesus.

Gene Edwards pictures it like this. He says, “All of creation moves towards this place where the Lamb of God will give his life and shed his blood for the redemption of God’s world and creation.” And God, in making this revelation clear, calls the people to himself. The nation of Israel – he gives great promises to Abraham. Every move of the people of God is this deliberate move to picture, to teach. God desires to dwell with his people. He desires to fill us, to be with us, but we are enslaved to sin and to bondage. So God takes his people into Egypt and there they become enslaved. There is an Exodus, all picturing for us that salvation is ours. And what may be the greatest picture of salvation in the Old Covenant, the Old Testament scripture is the Passover Lamb.

At every Passover, year after year after year, lambs are slaughtered and blood is spilled, anticipating the day when the Lamb of God will give his blood for the forgiveness of our sin. Imagine the scene! The day comes and all of heaven rushes to see the sacrifice of the pure, spotless Lamb of God. Jesus is crucified and redemption is provided. The first New Covenant convert emerges into the paradise of heaven, and it’s the thief that was hanging on the cross.

The mercy of God to save sinners! If you have tasted at all the destruction that sin against you can bring, or the sin that you commit can bring, you will say, “I will gladly lay down the pretention that ‘I don’t really need a savior,’” and run to the cross and fall before him and say, “Jesus, save me. Cleanse me. Break the cycle of that destruction.”

For me, the glorious revelation of that came when I became a father. I found it easier until that moment to justify the destruction of my own sin. But when I began to see how I couldn’t fully protect my children from my weaknesses, my sin, my failures, and the fear rose up that my shortcomings would destroy them for life, there was a glorious moment of revelation where I could say, “You know what? I need a Savior.”

I’m not pretending for a moment that I wasn’t saved till then. But there are these emerging revelations of the glory of God’s salvation for us. He invites you to freely come. That’s the message of Easter. Easter eggs and spring colors and green emerging – wonderful symbols that point us to new life that is eternal. Let the themes of Easter be living realities in your own heart. Amen? Amen. Let’s pray.