

Isaiah 53: 1-6
Luke 23:32-43

April 14, 2019

Friday Opens Paradise

Today I'm bringing the last message based on the themes from our Lenten study "8 Day Revolution:" from Friday to Friday of Jesus' final week. We began six weeks ago with the story of the costly devotion. On a Friday, Jesus was at the home of his friends Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha, in Bethany, just three miles from Jerusalem. At a dinner party in his honor Mary poured out very expensive perfumed oil on Jesus, lavishing her gratitude on him. **We are either glorifying ourselves, or we are glorifying God.** Her extravagant act (the oil and perfume were worth an annual salary) was questioned and criticized. Was it worth it? It could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Jesus said: *"When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial,"* Matt. 26:12. Jesus, in a sense, was welcoming death.

Following this was his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which really undermined the establishment. Then Andrew preached for us about Jesus' act of cleansing the Temple – cleaning house, so to speak, His Father's house, which is really His house. Then I preached about authority when Jesus' authority to teach was questioned – but as the Son of God he really answers to no one other than His heavenly Father. Last week Darrell preached for us on how Jesus really redefined religion.

Today is the Sunday that we traditionally commemorate His triumphant entry into Jerusalem, just before the Passover, but instead we will be following the outline of our small group study and focusing on what happened on that last Friday – the day He was crucified. That's why today's message is entitled "Friday Opens Paradise."

Only A Symbol?

The Friday we're talking about is the Friday of the cross – the day Jesus was taken out of Jerusalem and nailed to that symbol of suffering and shame. It was the Roman method of execution ... a most agonizing death for those most despised of criminals.

Have you noticed how many people today wear a cross, as a necklace or pendant, or a lapel pin, or hang a small cross on their wall or from their auto mirror? It's become a symbol, of course for Christians, but these days some people who like to wear such crosses don't seem to exhibit anything close to real Christian faith. Look at the number of drug promoting rock stars, promiscuous Hollywood personalities, alcohol consuming sports heroes, and pretentious politicians, who seem to have a curious affinity for wearing the cross. Sadly it's become a secular symbol.

To many, a cross is a mere trinket to hang around the neck, intended to make a vague assertion about one's religious pedigree. For some, the symbol has become the substance. Let me tell you a story. In Numbers chapter 21 it tells of the Israelites in the desert, led by Moses from their slavery in Egypt to their freedom in the Promised Land of Canaan. Some of the people were bit by “fiery serpents” it says, and they died. The people cried out to Moses, who prayed to God and was told by God to make a bronze serpent and set it on a standard. Whenever anyone was bit by a poisonous snake they were to look at the bronze snake and they would be healed (see Numbers 21:6-9). Several generations later, after the Israelites had settled in the land God gave them, and after they had been led by several generations of kings, we find this story *“He (the good king Hezekiah) removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it. (It was called Nehushtan.),”* II Kings 18:4. Then fast-forward to the Gospel of John, chapter 3. Jesus is talking with one of the leaders of the Jews, Nicodemus ... talking about being “born again” and the work of the Holy Spirit. At one point in the conversation Jesus says, ***“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life,”*** John 3:14-15.

What’s my point with all this? It’s this: so easily do **we let the symbol take the place of the substance.** That bronze serpent that God gave Moses to save the people became an idolatrous symbol handed down through dozens of generations, worshipped by some Israelites. Hezekiah broke it calling it simply a “piece of bronze” (*Nehushtan*). They were worshipping the symbol rather than the God whose healing grace and mercy the symbol represented. The cross represents Jesus Christ and His sacrifice for sin. That’s what Jesus meant when He said to Nicodemus, *“so must the Son of Man be lifted up.”* The cross, whether standing full-size on a hill or hanging from your neck as an item of jewelry, does not heal us or bring salvation. It is **only the One who died on a real cross,** as a sacrifice for our brokenness – our sin– who **brings us healing and salvation.** The cross is only the symbol of what He has done.

What The Cross Means

Through wood and nails Jesus disempowered human depravity (including yours and mine) and transformed us by His grace. Here’s what it means:

1. The cross shows us the severity of our sins. We live in a world in which the depths of human depravity are on daily display. Serial murders. Child molesters. Human trafficking. Women and children abducted and violated. Recently several states legalized infanticide. Terrorists still wreak havoc and are cheered by their supporters. Millions of people still live under the tyranny of dictatorial regimes. We could go on... And what about each of our own lives?

Can any of us deny that we too have sinned and come short of the glory of God? Can we deny that the wages of our sin is eternal death? Who among us could not plead as did St. Paul: ***"This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Jesus Christ came to save sinners, of whom I am the chief,"*** 1 Timothy 1:15.

2. The cross of Christ speaks of the certainty of death and judgment. ***"And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment,"*** Heb. 9:27. As sure as we live we die. Whether we like it or not, death knocks at the door of the humble or the haughty, the beggar or the billionaire, the hovel or the highest house on the hill. It is an appointment all must keep. Young or old, beautiful or ugly homely, famous or infamous people, the saint or sinner, all people must face it.

Death may be as close as a malignant cell, one heartbeat, a piece of foreign matter in the blood stream, or one sub-microscopic deadly virus or bacteria. This sobering realization should move us all to pray as did the psalmist: ***"Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom,"*** Psalm 90:12.

3. The cross of Christ shows us the scope of God's great love. On the cross we can see the height of God's love contrasted with the depth of humanity's sin. "To the mystery of undeserved suffering, Jesus brings the deeper mystery of unmerited love." The golden text of all the Bible says it all: ***"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life,"*** John 3:16. God didn't give us more instructions, more laws, more material wealth He gave His Son to bear all the consequences of sin and human depravity. ***"He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed,"*** 1 Peter 2:24. Real love is always measured best by selfless sacrifice.

4. The cross of Christ satisfies humanity's greatest needs. It has been said there is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person, and our souls are not at rest until they find their rest in our Creator. Every man, woman, and child has an innate need to know God, to be accepted by Him and loved by Him.

Our need for a clean and clear conscience before God can only be met at the foot of the cross, where we meet God face to face and learn of His great attributes of love, justice, and mercy. ***"Come now, let us settle the matter,"*** says the LORD. ***"Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool,"*** Isaiah 1:18.

5. The cross of Christ is God's only way of salvation. If there had been any other way, surely God the Father would have chosen it. He gave His only begotten Son. As someone has said, "If we could work our way to heaven by good deeds, religious rituals, ordinances, or action of any kind, why, or why did Jesus suffer and die on the cross for our sins?" ***"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God,"***

Ephesians 2:8. The Word of God tells us again and again that what Jesus did on the cross was an all sufficient sacrifice for our sins and the only basis of eternal salvation. ***“Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’”*** John 14:6.

Opening Paradise

We know from the Gospel accounts that there were three crosses that day when Jesus was crucified. On either side of him were two notorious criminals, suffering the ultimate punishment for their crimes. One of them, in his bitterness, hurled abuse at Jesus. But the second criminal rebuked the first saying, ***“...we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but his man has done nothing wrong.”*** Then he turned to Jesus and said: ***“Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*** And Jesus replied, ***“Truly I say to you, today you shall be with me in Paradise,”*** Luke 23:39-43.

Notice Jesus said ***“... today you shall be with me in Paradise.”*** Jesus did not say, “You will be over there and I’ll be over here.” He said, “It’s you and Me together - side by side.” Wherever Jesus was going this criminal would be right by His side – and where Jesus is, there is life. **All of us need to be at the side of Jesus.** Out of a life of sin and shame, that criminal passed into eternal blessedness because he clung to Jesus. “It’s at the place of the Cross where pain and paradise meet.”

There are three lessons of Hope and Encouragement in this story:

1. It’s never too LATE to be saved. It’s never too late to turn to Jesus. As long as there is life and breath, as long as the heart still beats, the invitation still stands. Jesus said in **Matthew 11:28:** ***“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”***

Can someone be saved at the last second? The criminal on the cross was – why not others? It’s never too late to turn to Jesus; no one is ever too far gone. Yes, that man waited until the last second, but in the last second he was saved. Don’t ever - ever - ever give up on those you love. They may, like the criminal on the cross, waste a lifetime and then at the end turn to Jesus. It’s never too late.

2. No one is ever too BAD to be saved. Some people feel they are too far gone into sin to ever be forgiven. It doesn’t matter where you’ve been sleeping. It doesn’t matter what you’ve been drinking. It doesn’t matter who you’ve been hanging around with. It doesn’t matter what sins you’ve committed. Anyone can be forgiven right now. Even the very worst of people can be saved. They can be saved right now. If this man can be saved - all can be saved. If there’s hope for him -there’s hope for others too – including you. If he can make it to Paradise, so can they. If Jesus would take him, He’ll certainly take them. Jesus came to save people. That is what He does. **Luke 19:10** says: ***“... for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”*** If people are lost - Jesus has

come to save them. It does not matter how bad they think they are. Jesus has come to save sinners.

3. Salvation is never too HARD. God has made salvation simple so that anyone can be saved. Salvation was not based on the criminal's church attendance. That man was never baptized. He never took the Lord's Supper. He never attended Sunday School class, but he made it to Paradise. Salvation was not based on the criminal's acts of good works. His salvation was totally based on the mercy of God, not on what he had done for God. All that God wants from us is simple faith in Jesus. It's that simple - confess - believe and you will be saved.

That man on a cross had no chance to do anything except to confess his sin, saying: *"...we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds ..."* Then he placed his faith in Jesus. Faith in the person of Jesus – not some notion we have of who He is. It takes a personal relationship with Jesus in His fullness (whom we meet in Scripture). "Jesus keep me near the cross, because when I'm near the cross I've already set one foot in paradise."

What a gracious and glorious God we know in Jesus! He eagerly awaits the sinner's cry today. Couldn't every one of us cry: *"God, have mercy on me, a sinner!"*

Repeat these words of St. Peter with me, if you will: ***"The Lord is ... not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance," 2 Peter 3:9.***