

"The Death of Jesus and the Judgment of God"
Sermon Series on *The Cross* - # 5
Rev. Dr. Peter B. Barnes
First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
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(Mk. 15:33-39)

Introduction.

A couple of years ago, I travelled to Italy, and I had an amazing experience visiting the ancient sites, studying the history, viewing the art, and, of course, eating all the wonderful food. During the tour we saw many of the great cathedrals that have been built there over the years, and some of them are 500- and even 1,000-years-old!

When you walk into one of these grand cathedrals, your attention is immediately drawn upward because of the high vaulted ceilings, and the architecture inspires you to think about the majesty and the transcendence of God. But as you walk around the cathedral it begins to dawn on you that the footprint of the building is actually in the form of a cross. There is the long nave and the transepts, and then at the front of the cathedral where worship is led and an altar stands, there is the top of the cross. The floorplan of the entire building is actually in the shape of a cross. In big and small ways the cross has become *the* dominant symbol of Christianity.

However, that wasn't always the case. When I visited the Catacombs outside the city of Rome, I saw many Christian symbols that believers painted on the crypts of those who were buried there in the 1st and 2nd centuries. But I never saw a cross. I saw a fish, an anchor, and drawings of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. I also saw the Greek letters *XP* which are the first two letters of Christ's name in Greek. It's fascinating. The cross didn't become a symbol of Christianity until late in the second century. I think the reason for this is because of the horror associated with this awful form of capital punishment. C.S. Lewis once pointed out that the crucifixion didn't become common in Christian art until all who had seen a real one had died off!¹

But over time the cross became *the* symbol of our faith, and the reason is because the centrality of the death of Jesus on the cross dominates the gospel story. Today I want to talk about the death of Jesus, His spiritual abandonment by the Father, and the judgment Christ endured on our behalf.

I. The Death of Jesus.

Have you ever wondered why the Apostles' Creed says that Jesus died? Isn't that obvious? After all, He was executed on a cross. Well actually, no. It isn't obvious to some people. From the earliest days of Christianity to our present time, there have been people who have questioned whether or not Jesus actually died on the cross.

For example, an early expression of Christianity called Gnosticism tried to separate the spiritual from the material in this world, and they had a hard time reconciling the idea of God

actually dying. So they came up with a theory that God didn't really die on the cross. Instead, what happened was that the Holy Spirit entered Jesus at His baptism, but the Spirit departed from Christ before His crucifixion. Eventually this idea was rejected by the early church, and it was officially ruled to be a heresy.

Another example of questioning whether or not Jesus really died is a notion that has actually been around for centuries but was revived and popularized several years ago in the book *The Passover Plot*, and then again more recently in Dan Brown's novel *The da Vinci Code*. The authors suggest that Jesus didn't really die on the cross, but rather He just passed out and only appeared to die. When he was put in the tomb, the cool air revived Him, and He was able to walk out on His own. This idea is commonly known as the "swoon theory."

A final example of how people have struggled with Jesus' death is the way in which Islam treats the matter. I shared this with you a few weeks ago, and I said that Muslims reject the cross of Christ and declare that it's wrong to think that a major prophet of God should come to such an ignominious end. The commonly held belief among Muslims is that God cast a spell over the enemies of Jesus in order to rescue Him, and that either Judas Iscariot or Simon of Cyrene was substituted for Christ at the last minute.²

Why is any of this important? It's important because all of these ideas make a mockery of what the Bible clearly says concerning the death of Jesus. All four gospel writers go to great lengths with extraordinary detail to demonstrate that Jesus really and truly was dead. Matthew says that Jesus cried out with a loud voice and yielded up His spirit. Luke tells of the moment of death and then goes on to relate the heart-broken reaction of those who witnessed it.

John goes even further and tells of the soldiers' decision not to break the legs of Jesus in order to hasten His death because it was obvious that He was already dead. John also gives the detail of the thrust of the spear into Jesus' side and the flow of water and blood from the wound, proof that death had occurred. And in our passage today in Mark's gospel, it says the centurion watched Jesus breathe his last with his own eyes.³

Everywhere you turn in the NT there is an insistence on the death of Jesus Christ. Why? Because without Jesus' death there is no forgiveness, there is no atonement, and we are still lost and dead in our sins. And there is no resurrection from the dead. That's why the writers of the NT insist over and over again that Jesus actually died. He truly suffered death by crucifixion with all its agony, and He was laid in a tomb. His death was complete.

II. The Abandonment by the Father.

Beginning at verse 33 we read about the abandonment Jesus experienced on the cross. It says, *"At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land, and at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?'"*

Scholars have pointed out that this saying is actually a quotation of the first verse of Psalm 2, which is a great Messianic psalm. In that psalm it is an urgent appeal to God to intervene on behalf of the righteous person who was suffering. On the cross Jesus was living out the situation described in this Messianic psalm of agony. Up to this point in time, the relationship Jesus enjoyed with His heavenly Father was deep, intimate, and so important. But now, Jesus is abandoned by the Father. And because of the Father's abandonment, it was all the more costly to Him.

If after this worship service, someone came up to you and said, "I never want to see you or talk to you again," it would probably hurt your feelings. But the amount of pain you would experience would depend on how close the person is to you. If they were a perfect stranger, it would probably be no big deal. However, if today after the service your spouse came up to you and said, "I never want to see you or talk to you again," that would be a completely different story, and it would be a whole lot worse. You would be devastated. And the reason is because the deeper the love and the more intimate the relationship, the greater the torment of the abandonment is.

God the Father and God the Son enjoyed an intimacy you and I cannot fully comprehend as mere mortals. During His earthly ministry Jesus said, "*I and the Father are one.*" They had loved each other from all eternity, and this love was infinitely long, absolutely perfect, and completely satisfying. And Jesus was losing it. He was being cut out of the dance. And more than that, He was bearing the sin of the world and the judgment of God, and the Father turned His back on the Son.

"*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*" The question wasn't a rhetorical one. Why was Jesus forsaken? The answer is He was forsaken for you, for me, for us. Jesus was forsaken by God so that we would never have to be, and the judgment that should have fallen on us fell upon Him instead.

Christianity is the only religion that says that God Himself suffered. Whenever we suffer, we may be completely in the dark about the reason for our suffering. It may seem as senseless to us as Jesus' suffering seemed to the disciples. However, the cross of Christ at least tells you what your suffering *is not*. It can't be because God doesn't love you, or that He doesn't have a plan for you. And it can't be because God has abandoned you. Jesus was abandoned by God the Father on the cross and so that God would never abandon us. The cross proves that God loves us, and He understands what it means to suffer.

Are you going through a difficult time right now? In what ways are you suffering today? When have you felt abandoned? Consider the suffering of Jesus and draw strength and encouragement from His sacrifice of love which is proof that God knows, and He cares. Jesus was abandoned on the cross so you would never be.

III. The Judgment of God.

Back in 1937, a theologian by the name of H. Richard Niebuhr wrote a book entitled *The Kingdom of God in America*. In it he criticized what he thought was becoming the creed of liberal Protestant theology, which was called "modernism" in those days, and was beginning to dominate mainline denominations like the Presbyterian Church. Niebuhr summarized the beliefs of modernism with these poignant words: He said they believe in "a God without wrath who brought human beings without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."⁴

Nowadays people, and even many Christians, are uncomfortable with words like "sin," "judgment," and "wrath." These words have become problematic and unsettling for people today, especially the phrase "the wrath of God." One scholar I read said that they believe many Christians today deal with God's wrath the way Victorians handled sex back in the 19th century – they treat it as something that is a bit embarrassing and shameful. You shouldn't talk about

it, and it's best left in the closet. If we do that the result is our view doesn't align with what the Bible says about who God really is.

Just prior to his election as pope, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger appears to have had this concern in mind in his Good Friday meditation back in 2005. One of his texts was Lamentations 3:1-2 which says, *"I am a man sorely afflicted under the rod of God's wrath."* The future pope applied this prophecy to Christ and His sufferings on the cross, and he said it reveals both the gravity of sin and the seriousness of judgment.

Cardinal Ratzinger said, "Can it be that, despite all of our expressions of consternation in the face of evil and innocent suffering, we are all too prepared to trivialize the mystery of evil? Have we accepted only the gentleness and love of God and quietly set aside the word of judgment? Yet as we contemplate the suffering of the Son, we see more clearly the seriousness of sin, and how it needs to be fully atoned if it is to be overcome."⁵

In whatever way you try to understand or explain what happened to Jesus on the cross of Calvary, it surely means at least this: that Jesus experienced the justice and the judgment of God so that you and I won't have to, and that this cataclysmic cosmic event addressed the problem of sin and evil in a way that was both just and loving. Whenever we try to explain away the wrath of God or soften the hard words of Scripture, we wander from the truth of the gospel and minimize the seriousness of both our sin and the evil that exists in the world.

When we think of God's wrath, we usually think of God's justice, and that's right. Those who care about justice do get upset whenever they see justice being trampled upon or innocent people taken advantage of. If that is what happens when you and I see injustice taking place, then we should expect a perfectly just and holy God to do the same. People today fail to understand how much God's wrath is a function of His love and goodness. Many people today say, "I don't want a God of wrath; I only want a God of love." But that doesn't make any sense. The reason is because if God is loving and He is good, then He must be angry at evil – angry enough to do something about it.

And He did. He sent Jesus to die in our place and bear the judgment and punishment we deserve. God is full of compassion, kindness, and mercy, but He also has a righteous indignation against all injustice, and He is unremitting in His opposition to everything that is evil, including the evil that exists in each of our hearts.

Conclusion.

Do you remember Lily Potter, the mother of Harry Potter in the books J.K. Rowling has written? In the first book of the series, the evil Lord Voldemort tries to kill Harry, but he can't touch him. When Voldemort tries to grab Harry, he experiences agonizing pain, and he's thwarted in his evil attempt. Later on, Harry asks Dumbledore, his mentor, "Why couldn't he touch me?" Dumbledore replies, "Your mother died to save you....love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign....[but] to have been love so deeply...will give us some protection forever."⁶

Dumbledore's statement is moving, isn't it? Why is that? It's because we know from experience that sacrifice is at the heart of real love. Whether it's the sacrifice of a parent for a child, the sacrifice of a soldier for his/her country, or the sacrifice of someone like Mother Teresa for the sake of the poor, sacrifice leaves its own mark. And that is no more true and no more evident than in the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross for you and me. Even we flawed

human beings know that you can't just overlook evil. It has to be dealt with. And it can't be overcome or healed simply by saying, "Oh, forget it." No. It must be paid for and dealing with it is costly. It cost Jesus His life

Tim Keller has said that God created the world in an instant, and it was a beautiful process. And He re-created the world on a cross, and it was horrible.⁷ Love that really changes and redeems something is always a substitutionary sacrifice. C.S. Lewis put it like this in his book *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, "When a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backward."⁸

That's what happened when Jesus died on the cross for you and me. May the knowledge of Jesus' death, His abandonment, and the judgment He endured bring you peace, comfort, and joy this day and always. Amen.

Closing Prayer.

Christ was all anguish that I might be all joy,
cast off that I might be brought in,
trodden down as an enemy
that I might be welcomed as a friend,
surrendered to hell's worst
that I might attain heaven's best,
stripped that I might be clothed,
wounded that I might be healed,
athirst that I might drink,
tormented that I might be comforted,
made a shame that I might inherit glory,
entered darkness that I might have eternal light.

My Saviour wept that all tears might be wiped
from my eyes,
groaned that I might have endless song,
endured all pain that I might have unfading health,
bore a thorny crown that I might have
a glory-diadem,
bowed his head that I might uplift mine,
experienced reproach that I might receive
welcome,
closed his eyes in death that I might gaze
on unclouded brightness,
expired that I might forever live.⁹

¹Cited by Phillip Yancey in *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 203.

²*The Koran*, pp. 114 (liii.38), 176 (xxv.18), 230 (xvii.15), 274 (xxxix.7), and 429 (vi.164). See also the spurious 'Gospel of Barnabas', written in Italian in the fourteenth or fifteenth century by a Christian convert to Islam which contains parts of the Koran as well as of the four canonical Gospels.

³Mt. 27:50; Mk. 15:39; Lk. 23:46-49; Lk. 24:19-21; and Jn. 19:30,34. On this last point, see Stroud's treatise on *The Physical Cause of the Death of Christ* or James Stalker's *The Trial and Death of Jesus Christ*, 177.

⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1937).

⁵ Cited by Timothy George in *First Things*, July 29, 2013.

⁶ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), 169.

⁷ Timothy Keller, *King's Cross* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 144. I'm indebted to Keller for some of the insights in this sermon.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Collier/Macmillan, 1970), 169.

⁹ From *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions* (Edinburgh: Banne of Truth).