

SERMON TITLE- "Why Did Jesus Have To Die?"

TEXT- Matthew 26:31-35 & Matthew 28:1-10

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We have been going through a series of sermons on Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. In it He lays out His message and program. This sermon was His introduction to the world and from that beginning He collected a group of disciples that He trained by the principles of the SOTM. For 3 years this training went on and it was intensive.

At the end of those years Jesus' followers were extremely committed to serving Him and were preparing themselves for the amazing Kingdom that He was introducing.

But not everything was what it appeared. Last week Ryan spoke about Palm Sunday and the great mixture of anticipation and fear that were part of it.

And the fears proved to be well founded. Jesus, the Son of God was taken captive, tortured and crucified. This leads to one of the really big questions that we have to figure out the answer to- if Jesus really was God's Son-

Why Did Jesus Have To Die?

Surely if He was really God there must have been another way around such a horrific and contradictory conclusion. If God can do anything why was THIS the conclusion to Jesus' time on earth? This is a puzzle at all kinds of levels and answering it is one of the assignments of the Easter story.

So that is what we will do today. But we do have to go back just a bit to do it. In fact if the SOTM is foundational we should find that the answer actually goes back to it as well.

As we learned last week- Palm Sunday was the culmination of the 3 years of Jesus' teaching. He had taught, He had healed the sick, He had fed the hungry, He had challenged the authorities- now He was the well-deserved hero.

What a great day it was! Can you imagine a genuine hero coming in to take control of everything? No wonder the crowds were cheering as He rode into town that day. It was a great day to be a disciple. They were flush with excitement.

One little story that illustrates this was-
Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.
"What is it you want?" he asked.
She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."
"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them.
"Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"
"We can," they answered.
Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup . . ."
Matthew 20:20-23

This took place just before Palm Sunday and helps you understand what was going through their heads. Great triumphant days were ahead. If you know a true hero just being near him is special. When Janet and I were in Phoenix a few weeks back- there was Air Force One- President Obama's plane sitting on the tarmac next to us. I'm not a big US President fan but it was thrilling to be even that close.

The disciples were Jesus' closest friends. The mother or James and John knew this, and was looking to have that close relationship to an "up and coming" hero clarified a little further. Who could blame her?

But Jesus knew differently. He knew that this journey was about to take a very hard turn. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" They were quick to answer but as the next few days would show- they would prove to be spectacular in their failure- at least on the short run. They would drink from Jesus' cup but what was to follow was not going to be anything like what they were imagining.

In Luke's account Jesus' anticipation of this tough season was clearly described. As the crowds are cheering Jesus' triumphal ride He does a strange thing-

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side . . . because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you." Luke 19:41-44

Jesus knew that there was a profound misunderstanding at every level of those who followed Him.

And what was/is the problem? In spite of everything Jesus had said we/they hear it from the point of view- "What's in it for me?"

This was something we ran across when I talked about the "ask, seek, knock" promise that Jesus gave us.

And on the surface it looked like there was going to be a whole lot in it for them/us. Jesus was awesome and being on His team is an extremely good deal. He had not created this misconception. In fact He tried to explain the misunderstanding again and again- but we hear what we want to hear.

And what we want to hear is- "There's a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow- just follow the rainbow!" It's a message as old and time and forever effective. But it is not Jesus' message.

And the person who asked the question in a way I think we can all understand was Huck Finn. I gave you a portion of his thoughts on the subject-

I set down one time back in the woods, and had a long think about it. I says to myself, if a body can get anything they pray for, why don't Deacon Winn get back the money he lost on pork? Why can't the widow get back her silver snuffbox that was stole? Why can't Miss Watson fat up? No, says I to my self, there ain't nothing in it . . . I couldn't see no advantage about it -- except for the other people; so at last I reckoned I wouldn't worry about it any more, but just let it go.

For all his simplistic sounding language- HF actually understood something that few people get. The advantage of the Gospel is not what most people grab onto.

Jesus had never promised His followers all kinds of stuff on demand but in spite of that- these promises were what they were hearing. The day of reckoning was coming.

And so the day finally came when there was no avoiding the tough reality of what was to follow and Jesus again sat His disciples down and AGAIN explained the program. This time the reality was immediately at hand.

Then Jesus told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd,

and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Matthew 26:31-32

Again Jesus warns the disciples that His Kingdom was not what they had concocted. This very night the hard reality of that would be apparent.

The message was not without hope. Already He was telling them about a resurrection- but that went completely past them and as events unfolded it was clear how completely they missed that piece.

For now Peter jumps in and does what Peter does best- declaring his commitment to the bitter end.

Peter replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." Matthew 26:33

It would be a magnificent speech except that, like many magnificent speeches, saying it was much easier than doing it. And Jesus has to remind Peter of a bitter reality-

"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." Matthew 26:34

Peter, doing what he does best, is not deterred by a mild rebuff and just jumps in more deeply-

But Peter declared, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the other disciples said the same. Matthew 26:35

Well, it was Jesus who proved right at the end of the day. Peter had a burst of adrenaline and like all adrenaline driven people he collapses in a hopeless heap afterwards.

Jesus is taken prisoner, is crucified and buried. And part of the answer to the reason for Jesus' death is-

Jesus Death Explodes The Prosperity Misconception

The Cross explodes the idea that following Jesus is the ticket to a wonderful life of health, wealth and popularity.

We of course know that this is not where the story ends. In fact we know that Jesus rises from the dead.

But let's not rush ahead too quickly because even though Jesus had told them that this would happen they had completely missed it.

In fact, I believe, the re-awakening to what the message of the Kingdom is, is part of really understanding what the Kingdom of God is all about.

Listen to how the Easter story unfolds-

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. Matthew 28:1-4

What a great ending! In fact it is the ultimate ending. Death that was supposed to be the end isn't. Those enemies who wanted Jesus out of the way have clearly been defeated. The drama and majesty of that moment says it all. Who wouldn't like to see their mortal enemies shaking like leaves until they become like dead men?

It looks, at first, like they had just not waited quite long enough for the pay-off but now it was here. Now, not only was Jesus going to be the ultimate ruler- He would have risen from the dead to take His place.

But that is not where the story goes. Now the angel turns to the women who had come to the tomb to prepare Jesus' body for burial.

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you." Matthew 28:5-7

The angel carefully demonstrates what they should have known from the beginning- Jesus does not stay in the tomb- He has risen from the dead.

And there is more. Remember the message He had given the disciples?

"But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Matthew 26:31-32

"Tell the disciples . . ." and remind them what Jesus said about Galilee. That's where He will meet you.

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." Matthew 28:8-10

There is a wonderful excitement in being the messenger of good news and these women were that. They ran off filled with both joy and fear.

That's the Easter story- but before we move to quickly forward we need to go back to the questions and confusions that just preceded this great victory. And the reason we do that is to make sure we aren't just making another mistake like the first one.

If the first question is "Why did Jesus have to die?" the second question is-

What Does The Resurrection Mean? What's In It For Me?

The question is- how do we learn from our misconceptions? If we are driven by the question, "What's in it for me?" are we just doing another journey down that road?

If that question defines us, why don't we go back to it?

If the message of the Kingdom isn't about health, wealth and popularity then what is it all about? What else is there? What's in it for me?

The question can sound impertinent and to some degree it is- but let's not dismiss it too quickly. Let's not pretend that somehow we are above such bald self-interest. Put it another way- let's not fall too quickly into Peter's mistake of thinking that somehow he was above other people. Peter had no problem acknowledging the cowardice of his fellow disciples- he had a problem recognizing his own.

So if we are driven by self-interest what is it about the Gospel that is in it for us?

I believe that looking at it that way is what we are supposed to do. In fact when the Gospel is looked at that way I think we make some remarkable discoveries-

At first, the story of Jesus looks like a disaster. Last week Ryan spoke of the words to that Christmas Carol, O Little Town Of

Bethlehem- "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." That is indeed the story of Christmas but the story of the crucifixion is the story of every fear being realized and every hope dashed.

If God suffers such a fate where is the Good News in that? Add to that the realization that even with the resurrection is NOT about turning the tables at the last moment.

Jesus does not tell His followers to meet Him in Jerusalem where they will NOW take over control. No, He repeats again- "... **I will go ahead of you into Galilee.**"

Galilee was not the centre of the world but it was to be from where the Gospel would go out. God's treasure would come to light there.

If nothing else the disciples did now realize was that all their dreams of glory had been deep misunderstanding. Even with the resurrection we are not now given the ticket to health wealth and popularity.

So what do we get?

#1. Love- God Suffers With Us Because He Loves The World

The message of the cross is that God loves us- not like a magical sugar daddy who can magically take away all our troubles- with the love of someone who is willing to walk through the valley of the shadow of death with us.

Why did Jesus have to die? That's a very big question- but one part of the answer is- Jesus' death is God's demonstration of His love for us.

It is very cool to have the image of the soldiers shaking and becoming like dead men when the stone is rolled away from the tomb- but that isn't the core of the story- no, the more important part we need to understand is- God hanging on the cross- dying at our hands.

There have been all kinds of challenges that the Biblical God is powerless. These were first spelled out at the crucifixion itself-

Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads 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!"

In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. "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. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.' " Matthew 27:39-43

Variations of this have continued ever since.

But the answer also has not changed from the very beginning- from the message of the SOTM- God came to earth and would demonstrate His love for us. That's it! That is how much God loves us. God who came to earth and was willing to suffer with us is a deeper demonstration of love that a God who showers us with gifts that cost Him nothing.

At one level we don't get to pick what kind of a god we want but if we could would you rather serve a god who promises to wave a magic wand and make everything right- or a God who demonstrates His love for us?

Considering the world that I see around us- considering all those who make promises to fix everything and yet grief carries on- when the question is put that way- I don't think anyone would want a mere "sugar-daddy" god.

Yes, we serve God who was willing to die for us. His love is what is in it for us.

But there is more-

#2. Forgiveness- Our "Culpability" Doesn't Have To Be Our Legacy

What's in it for us? -the forgiveness of our sins. We know that of course but what does that mean?

Now "sin" is one of the concepts that people have struggled with since the beginning. We live in a culture that doesn't use that word very much and even as I prepared this point I was looking for another term that would be more understandable-

- mistakes
- errors
- blunders
- failures

Unfortunately I couldn't think of a word that really captured sin because each of those words has some shading of an excuse in them. Sin doesn't. The only word that I could think of is the word "culpability" and that seemed a bit off the beaten track for most of

us. BUT the more I thought about it- the more I came to conclude that maybe “culpability” might help us understand what sin is. Thanks to Wikipedia here’s what it is. It is the best definition of sin I have found-

Culpability descends from the Latin concept of fault (culpa), which is still found today in the phrase mea culpa (literally, "my own fault"). The concept of culpability is intimately tied up with notions of agency, freedom and free will. All are commonly held to be necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for culpability.

In explanations and predictions of human action and inaction culpability is a measure of the degree to which an agent, such as a person, can be held morally or legally responsible. Culpability marks the dividing line between moral evil, like murder, for which someone may be held responsible and natural evil, like earthquakes, for which no one can be held responsible.

Life doesn’t often have black and white- but there is black and white and guilt and “culpability” are real even when they are mixed into all kinds of other actions and situation.

And if “culpability” is real- it would be very good to have release from it.

When Jesus died- He died for our “culpability.” For me that is a very important piece. I live with all kinds of levels of “culpability” in my life. I do spend a lot of time trying to sort out the degrees of it. I am not responsible for every disaster that takes place around me. In some I have none- in some I have a little bit- in other cases I have quite a lot- and if I am prepared to be honest in other cases I am almost completely responsible.

There is no moral benefit it taking blame for things we didn’t do- but there is a real moral problem with denying responsibility for things I am “culpable” for.

The message of the cross is that Jesus offers forgiveness to us.

Now if you read my title carefully you will note that I said “. . . doesn’t have to be . . .” Jesus did not write a check that covers all of our quilt- without qualification. Those who want forgiveness have to accept it.

Ironically many people- including each of us- don’t live in that release of guilt that Jesus offers.

That is another story- but the message of Easter is- for all who are willing to admit their “culpability” the cross is the sign of forgiveness.

That is a very big benefit that is being offered us.

But there is one more benefit-

#3. Assurance- The Resurrection Seals The Deal

We have spent quite a bit of time on the lead up to the Easter story. Today is Easter Sunday. Today is the day we celebrate the resurrection and now I am already on the 3rd of 3 points. Isn’t this a little unbalanced?

I hope not. I think that unless you understand what leads up to Easter Sunday we will easily fall into the error that follows Christians around- the error of missing the point.

Easter is such a great story that unless we understand what it rises out of we can so easily just grasp the enormous hope that it represents.

This past week we stood at the graveside of CM Scott and we said “goodbye” to the body that once contained him. And as we stood there we read the passage that all Christians should be reminded of at times like that-

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him . . . Therefore encourage each other with these words. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

For God’s people the grave is not the end and just as Jesus rose from the grave with a new body that will never suffer again- so too we look forward to that reality. That is why we can encourage each other in times of death.

But if that is the benefit of the Gospel Huck Finn’s question, “What’s in it for me- now?” still goes begging.

And if we don’t dismiss the question too quickly I think we discover a very big benefit in the resurrection.

The resurrection was God’s answer to all that had just transpired. And what does that mean?

1. God gave us an offer of new life through Jesus
2. That offer was rejected
3. In spite of that the offer stands
4. The resurrection proves God can deliver His promise

On Huck Finn's journey down the Mississippi he travels through the soul of the New World. Along the way he meets the full range of humanity- from the very best to the very worst and everyone in between.

Among the themes that are repeated over and over is the challenge of making promises and keeping them. This is a journey full of all kinds of promises. In an unstable, uncertain world knowing who your friends are and whether or not they intend to or are even capable of keeping their promises is a huge challenge.

Jesus came to earth with a message that contained a promise-

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you . . . If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! Matthew 7:7-11

You can't blame Huck Finn for being cautious around a promise like that. Frankly, listening carefully and even skeptically is the appropriate response in my opinion. As we look around us, like HF we see a lot of people not getting what they are asking for.

A very big part of the problem is the fact that we didn't listen to what Jesus was offering. Jesus did NOT come to offer us stuff. Instead He came to-

#1. Demonstrate His love for us

#2. To release of from our sins [culpability]

But the resurrection give the final piece- that assurance that what He has given is guaranteed.

Having an assurance is a very big benefit.