

The Cross
Good Friday – April 9, 2004
Dr. Jerry Nelson
www.Soundliving.org

“In a memoir of the years before WWII, Pierre Van Paassen tells of an act of humiliation committed by Nazi storm troopers who had seized an elderly Jewish Rabbi and dragged him to headquarters.

At the other end of the room, two other troopers were beating another Jew to death, but the captors of the rabbi decided to have some sadistic fun with him.

They stripped him naked and commanded that he preach the sermon he had prepared for the coming Sabbath in the synagogue.

The rabbi asked if he could wear his ceremonial head-covering, the yarmulke, and the Nazis, grinning, agreed.

It added to the joke.

The trembling rabbi proceeded to deliver, in a raspy voice, his sermon on what it means to walk humbly before God, all the while being poked and prodded by the hooting Nazis, and all the while hearing the last cries of his neighbor at the end of the room.”

Phillip Yancey who retells this story in his book, The Jesus I Never Knew, says,

“When I read the gospel account of the imprisonment, torture, and execution of Jesus, I think of that naked rabbi standing humiliated in a police station.

Even after watching scores of movies on the subject, and reading the Gospels over and over, I still cannot fathom the indignity, the shame endured by God’s son on earth, stripped naked, flogged, spat on, struck in the face, and garlanded with thorns. (Yancey, 199)

This is Good Friday and tonight I want you to join me in re-living, at least in part, the history of Christ’s death.

- I want us to get into the heart and mind of Jesus as he faced that cross.
- I want to again hear from him why it was that he, God the Son, allowed such a thing to happen.

This week's (April 5, 2004) edition of TIME magazine carries the cover story of "Why did Jesus have to die?"

It is a lengthy but it gives a fairly good summary of the major views of the purpose of Christ's death.

- There's the idea that Christ's death was an example to us of love.
- There's the idea that His death was a ransom paid to deliver us from bondage.
- And there's the idea that Jesus died to satisfy divine judgment against sin.

Unfortunately, the TIME article presents these views as if they were mutually exclusive.

The Bible teaches that Christ's death accomplished many things.

- It does characterize Christ's death as a ransom to redeem us.
- It does characterize his death as the supreme example of love for others.
- But it is the central reason for his death that I wish to emphasize again tonight.

I want us to come to the cross tonight to have our faith affirmed – affirmed by God himself.

I want God's Spirit to tell us again that Jesus died for us; that his death was not a mistake or martyrdom but was grace and mercy.

In his book Yancey, goes on to write, "Jewish and Roman leaders, just as those Nazi troopers, intended their mockery of Jesus to parody the crime for which the victim had been condemned."

The Jews hated Jesus for claiming to be the Messiah and so they would mock him as Messiah.

"Messiah, huh! Great, let's hear him prophecy."
(Wham)

“Who hit you, huh?”

(Thunk)

“C’mon, tell us, spit it out, Mr. Prophet”

“For a Messiah, you don’t know much do you?”

And the Romans condemned him and mocked him for being a king:

“You say you’re a king?”

“Hey, Captain, get a load of this.

“We have a regular king here, don’t we.

“Well then, let’s all kneel down before Hizzoner.”

“What’s a king without a crown?”

“Oh, that will never do – here, Mr. King, we’ll fix you a crown, we will.

(Crunch)

“How’s that? A little crooked? I’ll fix that.

“Hey hold still!”

“My look how modest we are – a naked king.

“Well, how about a robe then – something to cover that bloody back.

“What happened, did your majesty have a little tumble?”

“It went on like that all day long, from the bullying game of “blind man’s bluff” in the high priest’s courtyard, to the professional thuggery of Pilate’s and Herod’s guards.

There were also catcalls of spectators who turned out to jeer the criminals stumbling up the long path to Calvary.

And finally at the cross itself Jesus heard a stream of taunts from the ground below and even from one cross alongside.

- “You call yourself a Messiah?”
- “Well then come down from that cross.
- “How are you going to save us if you can’t even save yourself?”

Tonight I want us to see Jesus at the cross again; I want to hear the words, to watch the scene.

Why?

Because I need to be reminded once again that it actually happened; that it was not made-up story to make another point.

I need to know that this is not simply an Aesop's fable to illustrate and emphasize a moral.

I need to see this again as part of real history.

I think it was Dorothy Sayers who wrote that this is the only God who connects himself to history – to a certain point in time and space.

But whether it is watching Mel Gibson's movie, "The Passion of the Christ", or just mentally stepping back in history to re-live the event, we can hardly bear the injustice of it.

We are all angered by injustice.

We read The Grapes of Wrath about dust-bowl victims getting cheated in the migrant worker camps of California or The City of Joy about a nearly destitute family arriving in the city of Calcutta only to be cheated out of all they still owned, and we recoil.

None of us likes to see pictures of innocent young children bruised and broken at the hand of an abusive father.

And when we think of Jesus:

- The one who healed the sick,
- Gave sight to the blind,
- Forgave sinners,
- Fed the hungry,
- The Jesus who came to save people,
- The Jesus who is God himself, being spit on and beaten and killed, **we cringe at the injustice of it!**

Again from Yancey, "I have marveled at, and sometimes openly questioned, the self-restraint God has shown throughout history.

Why has he allowed the Genghis Khans, the Hitlers, and Stalins of the world to have their own way?

Why did God restrain himself?

“But nothing, nothing, compares to the self-restraint God showed that dark Friday in Jerusalem

“With every lash of the whip, every fibrous crunch of fist against flesh, Jesus must have mentally replayed the Temptation in the Wilderness and his struggle in Gethsemane.

- If only he had yielded to Satan’s offer – he would NOT have to endure this.
- If only he had admitted his will instead of the Father’s, he wouldn’t be here.”

So why doesn’t God stop the injustice?

Why doesn’t Jesus say, “Enough!”

Why God, why?

But I focus where Jesus did not.

Based on what Jesus said, even while on the cross, Jesus had other things on his mind that his physical suffering.

God the Son was not a victim that day.

And God the Father was not inactive that day.

In fact they were acting in the most powerful way imaginable.

In all his holiness and justice God was moving.

God was handing out justice.

Jesus’ physical pain was nothing compared to the pain of his soul when in anguish he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

- Some, here, know the pain of being abandoned by a parent.
- Some, here, know the pain of being abandoned by a spouse.
- But who can know the pain of God the Son, intimately and infinitely connected to the Father in a fellowship that humans can’t possibly know, experiencing his Father turn his back?

All of the righteous wrath of God against sin was poured out on his own Son.

But even so, we must ask “Why?”

We know who Jesus was in all his humility, grace and purity –
is this death not the ultimate injustice?

Why God? Why?

And the answer comes as we watch Jesus breath his last and hear him say, “It is finished!”

- These are not words of defeat or resignation.
- These are not the words of a martyr that the ordeal is finally over.
- There are words of triumph.
Jesus has completed the task – he has done what he came to do.

We know the Jesus who hung on that cross; and he it was not for HIS sin that he died.

We know it was for our sin.

“He who knew no sin, became sin for us.”

The ultimate injustice became the ultimate justice.

Sin was being punished.

Jesus willingly absorbed the infinite wrath of God against our sin.

There could be no peace with God until our sins were dealt with justly.

And God dealt with them in Jesus.

God was in Christ reconciling us to himself.

We come to the cross tonight, to re-live in our minds and hearts that God’s holy judgment against our sin was satisfied in Jesus.

I want to hear again his words, “It is finished!” – my forgiveness, my ransom, my redemption has been accomplished.

My sins, my rebelliousness, my disregard, my self-centeredness have been forgiven.

One woman wrote, “So what comes to mind when I think of the cross? Always, always, I see the arms; the outstretched arms of Jesus.” (Andrea Midgett, CT, April 3, 1995)

I want to see his arms stretched out wide on that cross – stretched out wide to include me.

He has promised they do!

- “Come unto me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.
- Come unto me all you who are tired of sin and I will forgive you.
- Come unto me all you who are scared to death of death and equally frightened of life and know that I love you and will never leave you.
- Come unto me all you who keep re-living your past sins and failures and know I will forgive you.

“It is finished!”