

Valley View Chapel
April 10, 2011
Three Days that Changed the World, Part 3
John 19:16 - 30

Introduction

The description of Jesus' death is simple and stark. In fact, it can be summarized in one word: "crucified." Volumes have been written about the way crucifixions were carried out and the physical suffering of the victims. The apostle John, in his account of Jesus' death, spared us the gory details. He described only the fact that he was "crucified."

We're told in John 19:16-18, "Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be *crucified*. So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). Here they *crucified* him, and with him two others — one on each side and Jesus in the middle." (NIV)

John is far more concerned about the *reason* for Jesus' death than the details surrounding the *means* of his death. Nor will I dwell on the physical details of crucifixion. But it might be helpful to our understanding of God's plan of salvation to know something about the history of crucifixion and why it was the execution method of choice by the Roman Empire in the first century of the Common Era.

According to the Greek historian Herodotus, the Persians invented crucifixion in the 7th century B.C. King Darius of Persia ordered the crucifixion of three political opponents in Babylon in 519 B.C. Alexander the Great employed the practice often in the 4th century B.C. when the Greek Empire was at its pinnacle. But it was the Romans who perfected it into an art form.

Charles Swindoll observed: "Crucifixion combined four qualities the Romans prized most in execution: unrelenting agony, protracted death, public spectacle, and utter humiliation."

The gruesomeness of crucifixion was why it was reserved for the lowest levels of society: slaves, disgraced soldiers, and Christians.

Yet Jesus was not the helpless victim of an execution over which he had no control. R.C. Sproul wrote: "What happened on the cross was not an accident of history, but it came to pass through the invisible hand of sovereign Providence." Dr. Sproul's contention is supported by Revelation 13:8 which referred to Christ as "the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world."

The cross did not take God by surprise. It was all part of his divine rescue plan for humanity, conceived in eternity past.

The Cross and the Plan of Salvation

The death of Christ was prophesied down to the minutest detail hundreds of years in advance. I'll back up that claim with three illustrations.

The first is the whole of idea of crucifixion as capital punishment. I mentioned a moment ago that it was invented by the Persians in the 7th century B.C. Yet the psalmist described it in Psalm 22. What's so special about that? Psalm 22 was penned in the 10th century B.C.! Psalm 22:16 reads: "they have pierced my hands and my feet." No form of execution existed 1000 years before Christ in which hands and feet were pierced.

Illustration # 2 of the Old Testament predicting the smallest details of the Messiah's death: It was a common practice for the soldiers who oversaw a crucifixions to divide up a condemned man's clothing.

John described this tradition in 19:23-24, "When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. 'Let's not tear it,' they said to one another. 'Let's decide by lot who will get it.' This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled which said, 'They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.' So this is what the soldiers did."

Incredibly, the same psalm that foresaw the Messiah's crucifixion predicted that the soldiers would gamble for his clothes. Psalm 22:18 couldn't be plainer: "They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing."

Illustration #3 that the Old Testament predicted the details surrounding Jesus' death: John included a seemingly unimportant piece of information in John 19:29.

Jesus asked for a drink and we're told that "A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips."

This was not unusual. Crucifixion led to dehydration, so crucified men often requested something to drink. What is unusual is that this minor detail was prophesied in Psalm 69:21a a thousand years before it happened: "They...and gave me vinegar for my thirst." (NIV)

There is no human explanation for the inclusion of such minutia. The logic of fulfilled prophecy is the only answer.

I've just mentioned three Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled by Christ – the fact of his crucifixion; that soldiers gambled for his clothes; and that Jesus asked for something to drink. In actuality, there were *456 Old Testament prophecies* that were literally and perfectly fulfilled by the coming of Jesus Christ to earth.

In his book *The Case for Christ*, Lee Strobel declared: “The odds of just eight Old Testament prophecies of Jesus coming true is one in 100 million billion. If you had this many silver dollars, it would cover the state of Texas two feet deep!”

Crucifixion and the Purpose of Salvation

So, *why* was Jesus crucified? Was it really necessary? Apparently Warren Buffett doesn't think so.

In June of 2006, Warren Buffett, the world's second-richest man at the time, announced that he would donate 85 percent of his \$44 billion fortune to five charitable foundations. Commenting on this extreme level of generosity, Buffett said: "There is more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way."

Warren Buffett is a financial genius, but he's not a theologian. His comments made me think of two questions:

- Who says there's more than one way to get to heaven? Is that just “conventional wisdom” or does Mr. Buffett have it on unimpeachable authority?
- If giving away 85% of your net worth will buy a person a ticket to heaven, then why did Jesus die on the cross? Was it not only an excruciating way to die, but utterly needless as well? Seems so, if people can get to heaven by being generous.

There's a reason why Jesus had to be crucified. It's because of sin. We have all fallen short of God's standard. Since God is perfectly holy and pure, he cannot allow sin into his presence lest it defile his holiness. Something had to be done so that sinful people could have a relationship with God.

But if our “good deeds” outweigh our bad deeds, then doesn't have to accept us?

Good deeds don't outweigh bad deeds on earth, so why should it work that way in heaven? I'll give a simple illustration of this truth and then a more complex one.

You get stopped for speeding. It's going to mean two points on your record and \$100 out of your pocket. You state your case to the policeman: “But officer, I worked 4 hours this week in the community food pantry. I walked in the “Buddy Walk” for Down's syndrome children. I took my turn last Sunday in church nursery. Doesn't that count for something?” You know the answer. Your good deeds don't count for anything.

That's a simple illustration. Here's a more complex version.

Bernard Ebbers was the former CEO of WorldCom. He had been indicted for orchestrating an \$11 billion accounting fraud that shut down the telecommunications firm in 2002. His company's collapse represented the largest bankruptcy in U.S. history and devastated the lives of thousands of employees. On the day of his sentencing, he stood before federal judge Barbara Jones and asked for mercy.

Speaking on behalf of his client, defense attorney Reid Weingarten cited 169 letters from Ebbers' supporters, detailing Ebbers' numerous (often anonymous) charitable gifts. "If you live 60-some-odd years," said Weingarten, "if you have an unblemished record, if you have endless numbers of people who attest to your goodness, doesn't that count? Doesn't that count particularly on this day?"

Federal Judge Barbara Jones said "No, it doesn't count." She sentenced Ebbers to 25 years in a federal penitentiary. No amount of good deeds that Bernard Ebbers had done could atone for his crime.

The only way that God can forgive our sins is if he accepts his own self-determined payment for our sins. God chose to have his perfect, pure and holy son take the penalty for our sins in our place on the cross.

Keep in mind that crucifixion was the most horrible way to die ever invented. But God chose crucifixion for his son in order to show the world just how serious our sin is in his sight.

So before the world was created, before Adam ever ate the forbidden fruit, the Godhead decided that Jesus Christ would die as a substitute for every sinner ever born. He would pay the penalty with his blood so that we wouldn't have to. That's what John 3:16 really means: "For God so loved the world that he sent his one and only son...."

I mentioned a moment ago that just before Jesus died, he asked for a drink. He did this for two reasons.

- His throat was parched;
- And there was something he wanted to say loud and clear for the world to hear. John was standing near the cross with Jesus' mother, so he heard what Jesus said and wrote it down. Here's what Jesus said: *Tetelestai!*

Tetelestai is usually translated "It is finished." What was finished?

Some scholars believe that Jesus was simply saying that his life was finished.

Others think he was saying that the old covenant of offering blood sacrifices to appease God was finished.

The late New Testament scholar Leon Morris pointed out that the word translated "said" is the Greek word *krazo* which means "to shriek" or "to cry out in a loud voice." In fact, it is the same Greek verb used in Matthew 27:23 when the mob screamed: "Crucify him!" Jesus didn't go out with a whimper. He died shouting "*tetelestai!*"

Greek scholars tell us that behind the word *tetelestai* is the idea of a "goal" or an "end result." The goal, the end result of Jesus' entire life came down to the moment that he shouted *tetelestai* – "It is finished!"

Tetelestai was what merchants would write on an invoice. It meant “the debt is paid in full.” When Jesus gave his life on the cross, he paid in full our collective debt to God and his law. That’s why John the Baptist called Jesus “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

And, by the way, *tetelestai* is why Warren Buffett can’t purchase a nano-second in heaven. Any contribution we want to make is not only unnecessary, it’s not allowed. Jesus paid the debt in full. All we can do is receive God’s gift of forgiveness.

Conclusion

Max Lucado, in his book *Cure for the Common Life*, illustrated this truth beautifully.

“The bank sent me an overdraft notice on the checking account of one of my daughters. I encourage my college-age girls to monitor their accounts. Even so, they sometimes overspend.

“What should I do? Send her an angry letter? Admonition might help her later, but it won’t satisfy the bank. Phone and tell her to make a deposit? Might as well tell a fish to fly. I know her liquidity. Zero. Transfer the money from my account to hers? Seemed to be the best option. After all, I had the \$25.37. I could replenish her account and pay the overdraft fee as well. Since she calls me ‘Dad,’ I did what dads do. I covered my daughter’s mistake.

“When I told her she was overdrawn, she said she was sorry. Still, she offered no deposit. She was broke. She had one option, ‘Dad, could you...’ ‘Honey,’ I interrupted, ‘I already have.’ I met her need before she knew she had one.

“Long before you knew you needed grace, your Father did the same. He made an ample deposit. Before you knew you needed a Savior, you had one. And when you ask him for mercy, he answers, ‘Dear child. I’ve already given it.’”

Long before we ever sinned and needed grace, God provided a way back to him. Revelation 13:8 tells us that the Lord Jesus is “the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.”

My prayer is that each one of us here today has received by faith and with thanksgiving God’s marvelous, infinite, matchless gift of grace.

