

“Beneath the Cross of Jesus,” John 19:16-30 (Palm Sunday, March 20, 2016)

¹⁶ So he delivered him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus, ¹⁷ and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. ¹⁸ There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. ¹⁹ Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” ²⁰ Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. ²¹ So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but rather, ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’” ²² Pilate answered, “What I have written I have written.”

²³ When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom, ²⁴ so they said to one another, “Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be.” This was to fulfill the Scripture which says,

“They divided my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots.”

So the soldiers did these things, ²⁵ but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son!” ²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

²⁸ After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), “I thirst.” ²⁹ A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. ³⁰ When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

PRAY

This morning marks the beginning of Holy Week. On the church calendar, this is Palm Sunday, which is the day on which Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the people met him with palm branches, which was a national symbol of Israel, hence the designation “Palm Sunday.” We looked at that last week.

Next week is Easter Sunday, and on Easter we will of course focus on the resurrection of Jesus from John 20. I want to encourage you and your family to participate in the Holy Week readings we talked about earlier in the service. But this Sunday we are hitting the fast forward button and looking at a Good Friday text – our passage for today describes the crucifixion of Jesus, which occurred on Friday of Holy Week.

From the four gospels we know that Jesus said at least seven different things from the cross, but this morning since we are in the gospel of John we’ll only look at the

statements John records – and he records three of them. And when you know how to understand these things Jesus said, when you really let them down into your heart and ponder these statements, you’ll find tremendous spiritual nourishment.

So let’s look at them, this morning, as we prepare ourselves for Holy Week. Three things Jesus says: first, “Behold, your son.” Second, “I thirst.” Third, “It is finished.”

First, “Behold, your son.” John the apostle (and there’s a good chance John is Jesus’ cousin) and Mary are standing beneath the cross of Jesus. And Jesus looks at Mary and says, “Woman, behold, your son,” and then he turns to John and says, “Behold, your mother.” What’s going on?

Probably by this time Mary was a widow – Joseph had died, and so Mary was counting on her son, Jesus, to provide for her (the way widows have for centuries around the world counted on their oldest son to provide for them). Now, this isn’t in the text, this is me speculating, but it makes sense: Mary is starting to panic. She sees her son on the cross and she’s of course grieving for him but she’s also beginning to wonder, “What’s going to happen to me? I’ve been counting on Jesus to provide for me and he’s about to die – what’s going to happen to me?” She had other sons we know but maybe they aren’t in the picture right now because she insisted on following Jesus while her other sons all wrote their older brother off as some kind of religious nut.

Now, Jesus is on the cross, and he knows that in a few days he’s going to rise again, and he knows that in a few weeks at least some (if not all) of his brothers are going to wind up believing in him as their resurrected Lord and Savior, so they’ll be reconciled to their mother and they’ll be around to provide for her. She has nothing to worry about.

But right now, in this moment, beneath the cross of Jesus, she’s panicking. And Jesus doesn’t get irritated and say, “Woman, stop crying – can’t you see? I’m being crucified here!” He doesn’t even say, “Woman, everything will be ok in a few days – trust me.” No, he says, “Woman, behold, your son.” Even on the cross, and going through unimaginable physical pain (to say nothing of the spiritual agony, which we’ll talk about more in a minute), the care and comfort of other people is on his mind.

I, obviously, have never gone through that kind of physical pain – the worst I’ve ever experienced is probably nausea from a stomach virus. But even at that low level of discomfort, the last thing I’m going to do is worry about the care and comfort of others. I am too focused on my own suffering to give any thought to that.

But not Jesus – even on the cross he cares for others, which goes to show us this: ***Jesus Christ is intensely interested in your well-being.*** What are two of our greatest fears? One fear is not having enough money to live on. But Jesus expressly tells us to ask him for our daily bread. Ask him, and he will give us what we need. He tells us, “Do not worry about your life, about what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear.” Jesus tells us, “I will provide for you.” At another point, Jesus says, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your

Father. ³⁰ But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.” Matthew 10:29-31.

You know, I used to think that those verses were hyperbole, but then I had kids. And years ago I used to try to cut the hair one of my boys myself, but I always messed up one side of his bangs when I did it, and the first several times I cut his hair I didn't know why. So, I started looking closely at his hair, I studied it, and I noticed that in this one spot on his scalp, his hair grew in a different direction – over here, it grew down, and over here, it grew back. And so that's why I kept messing it up.

Do you know what my son's scalp taught me? I know now after years of looking at his head how his hair grows. But we have a Father in heaven who has been looking over his children from before we were born, before we were formed in our mother's womb (that's Jeremiah 1:5). He's been looking over us, knowing us, taking delight in us so lovingly and so carefully that he literally knows even the number of the hairs on our head. *For some of us, knowing the number of our hairs is a more impressive feat than for others.* But don't you see? It means that Jesus Christ is intensely interested in your well-being.

But a second, and perhaps greater fear, is our fear of winding up alone. We fear that one day will look up and find that there is no one out there who cares about us. Or that right now we really believe that no one cares about us. But here's a second promise from Jesus: ²⁹ And he said to them, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, ³⁰ who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.” Luke 18:29-30.

Jesus says, “If you will follow me, if you will give up your own ideas about how life should be and obey my teaching and follow me wherever I lead you, you'll never be alone. You will have far more friends, far more family around you, through the church – through the people of God – than you ever would have had before.” Now, you have to follow first before the friends and family come – that's the way it works. You can't say, “Lord Jesus, give me the kind of friends I want and then I'll follow you.” But if you will trust him, he will provide. You will not be alone. He knows you badly want someone who will love you. You badly want companionship. You badly want someone to listen to you. You badly want someone to hold. He knows your longing, and he will provide – not in the way you want right now perhaps but he will provide. And the only reason he's not answering your prayers in the specific way you're asking right now is because he has something better in store for you. Can you trust him with that?

And can I just say that has been my family's experience at Grace Bible Church? My wife and I obey God very imperfectly. But we have at least wanted to leave house or brothers or parents for the sake of the kingdom of God. I think we've at least tried. And the Lord Jesus has been so gracious and seen to it that we have received many times more in terms of friends than we left behind. In our weak attempts to be obedient and follow Jesus to and in Oxford, Mississippi, we've experienced more fellowship and friendship through Grace Bible Church than we've ever known. We are constantly amazed by it. Thank

God for it, because it is his promise, for us and for you. Jesus is intensely interested in our well-being – he must mean that by telling Mary, “Behold, your son.”

Second, “I thirst.” Now, it might be tempting to think Jesus is merely saying, “I am thirsty,” because he’s being crucified out under the hot Palestinian sun. Of course, he’s thirsty – you’d get thirsty just from being outside, let alone be tortured like he was. Verse 29 says they gave Jesus sour wine to drink. Sour wine was the cheap wine everyone drank in that day – in the days before water purification systems, it was safer to drink wine or beer than just straight water. It would have been very weak wine, so it would not have served to dull Jesus’ pain. Matthew and Mark record that Jesus had already refused the drink meant to work as a painkiller – the wine mixed with myrrh. But the sour wine would have quenched his thirst.

So it’s tempting to think Jesus is complaining, but that’s not what’s going on – Jesus’ life is almost over, but he has not once complained at any point from his arrest the night before all the way through the six hours of his crucifixion. “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” Isaiah 53:7 (NIV 1984). When he was brought before the priests the night of his trial, he would not speak – he would not defend himself. In his examination before Pilate – silence. In his examination before Herod – silence. So Jesus did not complain at any point prior to this during his ordeal, and he wasn’t starting now.

Plus, in verse 28 we read: ²⁸ After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (**to fulfill the Scripture**), “I thirst.” Jesus wasn’t complaining – he was fulfilling a prophecy from the Old Testament, probably from Psalm 69.

All that to say this: **Jesus had a plan in going to the cross.** He wasn’t swept away by events or emotions that got out of hand. Even under this unimaginable burden, Jesus is in complete control. He knew what he was doing and saying the whole time. There was intention and purpose behind every word he spoke.

This is the uniform testimony of the Bible. “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.” John 10:17-18. Even when Jesus dies, in verse 30 John says Jesus “gave up his spirit.”

And then when Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter at first tries to stop it from happening. He draws his sword. But Jesus rebukes Peter and says, “Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?” John 18:11.

What’s the cup? The cup of God’s wrath. The cup of God’s anger. Now, what was Jesus’ plan? One word: propitiation. I don’t apologize for using a term I first remember hearing in college. I don’t want anyone here going any longer without knowing what it means, because you don’t have to be in college to understand it nor do I think you can

really grasp what the gospel of Jesus Christ is without knowing this word or at least understanding what it represents. To “propitiate” someone means “to turn aside or assuage someone else’s anger and wrath by offering them a gift.”

The Bible says that we deserve the wrath of God, the anger of God, the punishment of God because we are sinners, but Jesus Christ is “[the one] who delivers us from the wrath to come.” 1 Thessalonians 1:10. And the Bible is crystal clear on this point: Jesus Christ delivers us from the wrath of God by being the propitiation for our sins. That’s 1 John 2:2 word for word. Romans 3:23-25: “[F]or all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”

You know, we say things like “Jesus came to save us from our sins.” And that’s true, up to a point. But do you know what Jesus really saves us from? Jesus saves us from God ... from God and his wrath, his holy, righteous anger. By laying down his life for us voluntarily, Jesus Christ is the propitiation that rescues us from the wrath of God.

Of course, a lot of people hate this idea. Some theologians have called it “cosmic child abuse,” this notion that God would punish his son out of some kind of anger for our sins. But the point Bible-believing Christians have made for two thousand years is this: *if Jesus did not die to be the propitiation for our sins, then what in the world did he die for?*

Some have said that Jesus just to prove that he loved us, not to turn away God’s wrath. But does that really make any sense? Say you and a friend were walking across the Mississippi River bridge at Memphis. That’s a big, long, high bridge. And say that when you got to the middle of the bridge your friend turned to you and said, “I want to show you how much I love you.” And then he turned, and jumped off the bridge.

And as you watch him plummet to his death, you would say, “Wow! Look at how he loved me!” No, you’d say, “Oh, my goodness, my best friend was mentally ill and I didn’t know it.” That kind of death would teach you nothing about love.

But say you’re on that same bridge and a truck swerves over for some reason and is about to squash you like a bug. Yet at the last second your friend pushes you out of the way and is run over by that truck in your place. What would you say? You’d say, “Wow! Look at how he loved me!”

The Bible says the truck of God’s wrath was bearing down on you for your sins, but Jesus Christ became the propitiation for you, and the wrath of God hit him, not you. He took your place on the cross, and *turned away the wrath of God you deserve for your sins*. If Jesus Christ is not the propitiation for our sins, then his death makes no sense. But if that is why he died, then it makes perfect sense. Jesus himself said, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man should lay down his life for his friends.” John 15:13.

One last thing about propitiation: you might be saying, “J.D., I can understand why God would be full of wrath toward certain sins – rape, murder, sex trafficking, what ISIS is

doing in the Middle East. I'm full of wrath when I think of those sins. But is God really angry at me for my little, petty sins? My lying, my selfishness, my impatience, the candy bar I stole when I was eight years old? Am I really that bad compared with those guys such that Jesus would need to be the propitiation for my sins too?" And the answer is an unequivocal yes. Even the smallest sin requires propitiation.

And if you will just consider it, you actually want the answer to be yes. Friends, you do not want a God who says, "I'm going to punish only the really bad people, and I'll let the good people (or the not-so-bad people) go free."

My kids are all now school-age, and from I can tell their schools they do a really good job of positively reinforcing good grades and good behavior. My kids are motivated to good grades and good behavior in a way I don't remember me and my friends being motivated thirty years ago in school. I just remember getting yelled at a lot in school.

In my youngest son's class, a kindergarten class, they have this color chart, and the better you behave that day the higher you move up on the color chart. The goal is to end the day "on pink," at the top of the chart. There are nine colors or so on the chart. So, you start off on blue, in the middle of the chart, and if you're bad you go down the color chart, and if you're really bad all day you'll eventually get to red, where they have to call your parents. But if you're good all day long you get to move all the way up to pink, and *go to the treasure box*. And I don't know how those teachers do it but to hear my kids talk about going to the treasure box it's like they're talking about drinking from the Holy Grail. It's amazing to me.

But, if you don't get on pink, if you only make it to purple, the next to highest color, you can't go to the treasure box. Well, they must have a cutoff somewhere. *But when it comes to heaven and hell, the idea of a cutoff is impossible. Where would it be?* The guy who makes it to pink goes to heaven, but if you're the poor slob who only managed to get on purple then you're down in hell with the worst members of ISIS? **It's unimaginable.**

Plus, if only the "good people" could go to heaven, it makes a mockery of the notion that God is forgiving. Why do I say that? Because what would happen to the people who started off life way behind? There are kids who grow up in environments so rough and depraved that, literally, they aren't taught right from wrong. So they go all throughout their childhood and teenage years heaping up sins that the rest of us, because we had good parents who loved us and cared for us, were never tempted to commit. If God only let's the good people into heaven, then the kids who went down to red on the behavior chart by their early twenties and are serving life without parole in the state penitentiary could never make it up to pink. God would have to send them to hell – they've already committed all these crimes, it would be impossible for them to ever be considered "good people." God couldn't forgive them and let them into heaven.

Even the smallest sins, therefore, require propitiation, and that's why the Bible is so clear that our salvation does not in any way depend on our good works, but on our relationship with Jesus Christ. The question in the Bible is never "what have you

done?” but “do you know him?” In Matthew 7, Jesus says that many people will come to him on the last day saying, “Jesus, look at all the work we’ve done. Look at all the good deeds we’ve done. Surely, we’re getting into heaven.” And what does Jesus say? “And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” Matthew 7:23. Everything rides on your relationship with Jesus. **Do you know him?**

Third, “It is finished.” Verse 30: “When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, ‘It is finished’ [can also be translated “it is accomplished”], and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” In Mark 15:37, we read that Jesus said it with “a loud cry.” He shouted it.

Why does Jesus shout it? Jesus wanted everyone within earshot to know who could in turn tell us so we could know that everything necessary for you to have a relationship with the God of the universe has been done, finished, accomplished. There’s nothing else to do. You are completely accepted by God because through Jesus Christ’s life and death everything is finished. You can’t mess it up. You can’t make God stop loving you. Because of Jesus Christ your relationship with God is eternally secure. Nothing can break it.

That is not true in any other relationship. Every other relationship is dependent on your work. If you want to have a good relationship with your spouse, nothing is guaranteed – if you refuse to invest in that relationship and love your spouse, you may not wind up divorced but the relationship will eventually be broken beyond repair. It’s the same with you parents, your children (so much work there), your friends. And of course, they’ve got to work on it, too. You can’t just have one person doing all the work – you must both work on it or there won’t be a relationship.

But not with God through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ says to us, “I’ve done all the work – there’s no work left to be done on your part. Because of the life I lived on earth and because of the death I died on the cross, **it is finished.** The one relationship in your life that you can know is eternally secure and unbreakable is your relationship with God if you approach him through me.” That’s why the only question that matters is: **do you know him?** If you do, then nothing else matters. As Paul says in Romans, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” Romans 8:31. In other words, so long as your relationship with the creator God of the universe, the omnipotent, omniscient, Almighty Lord is unbreakable, then what else do you have to worry about? And the answer must be: nothing. What else could there possibly be to worry about?

I mean, if you were best friends with President Obama and Bill Gates, and they both assured you that no matter what happened in your life you’d have all the money you’ll ever need and all the doors opened you could ever want, would you be less inclined to worry? Of course! But in Jesus Christ we have a relationship with someone infinitely more glorious, more powerful, more loving than those two.

And so Jesus shouts, “It is finished.” Friends, those are three words you need to hear more than any other. Unless you stand **beneath the cross of Jesus** and truly, deeply

believe “it is finished,” you’ll never be able to rest. You’ll never be satisfied. You’ll never have a joy that is impervious to the pain, disappointment, and suffering this world throws at you.

Do you know why you’re so desperate and needy and weird in your relationships with the opposite sex? Because you don’t believe “it is finished.” You’re dying for the affirmation that comes from those relationships and you’re killing yourself to get it, because you don’t believe God really will surround you with people who love you. Do you know why you are so stingy with your money and overwork to make more of it? Because you don’t believe “it is finished.” You think it’s up to you to provide for your family and to purchase happiness with the things you can buy and so being generous is the furthest thing from your mind. Do you know why you can be so incredibly lazy? Because you don’t believe “it is finished.” You don’t really believe that God loves you so much that he is more dedicated to your joy than you are and so you can’t find the strength to obey him even when it’s obviously for your own good.

What we all need is to stand **beneath the cross of Jesus** and with eyes of faith see him and with ears of faith hear him shout, “It is finished.” It should go something like this with us: “Dear Name! The rock on which I build, my shield and hiding place, my never failing treas’ry filled with boundless stores of grace. Jesus, my Shepherd, Brother, Friend, my Prophet, Priest, and King, my Lord, my Life, my Way, my End, accept the praise I bring. Weak is the effort of my heart, and cold my warmest thought, but when I see thee as Thou art I’ll praise thee as I ought.”

And because of this the truest mark of a Christian is not good works (lots of people who aren’t Christians do good works) but worship. Now, don’t get me wrong, the works will follow the worship, but the worship is what marks the person who really believes “it is finished.” Friends, do you the time regularly to just sit in your chair in your living room or go on a walk in the park and turn your face to the sky and say, “I can’t believe it – it is finished! There’s nothing I have to do!”? Do you exult in that truth? Do you regularly, as Psalm 98 says, “Break forth into joyous song and sing praises!”? Do you know that? ***Do you know him?*** Oh, friends, please believe Jesus when he says, “It is finished,” and rejoice as we prepare for Easter Sunday. PRAY