

What Dying Meant to Jesus

John 14:28-31

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Tonight, as I'm sure you know, we have come to gather around the Lord's Table, a very special and sacred and joyous occasion in the life of the church. I can honestly say that as often as I have gathered at His table with those of like precious faith, as many times as I have done it since I was very small boy...and I'll never forget the first time that my mother and father decided I was going to go to the Lord's Supper. And I didn't know what the Lord's Supper was. And all I wanted to know was whether they were gonna have peas or not because I never have liked them. But from then on, the Lord's Table has always had a very special and wonderful meaning for me, and it continues to do so even to this very time.

And as we enter upon the Lord's Table, I want us to share together in some thoughts regarding the Lord's death so that we can approach the Table with the right spirit and the right attitude.

Our Lord said, "Do this in remembrance of me." A very simple command very simply defined. It is an act of remembrance. We do this to remember what the Lord has done. Naturally, the simplicity of the Lord's Table doesn't need a lot of profound explanations. Bread and the cup. Bread speaking of His body given for us. The cup of His blood. And really, it's a reminder of His death on the cross. So tonight, I wanna remind you, first of all, of His death and then something of the meaning of it. In Matthew 27:33, it says, "And when they were come unto a place called Golgotha," that is to say a place of a skull, "they gave Him vinegar to drink mingled with gall. And when He had tasted it, He would not drink. And they crucified Him and parted His garments, casting lots that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet: They parted My garments among them, and upon My vesture did they cast lots. And sitting down, they watched Him there and set up over His head His accusation written, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.'" In very simple, straightforward language does Matthew show us the crucifixion.

Our Lord said we were to remember Him. Let me help you to focus a little more intently on the crucifixion. As far as we know, the first known practice of crucifixion was by the Persians. And apparently, Alexander the Great, who along with his generals for all intensive purposes conquered the great Persian Empire, there picked up this amazing, cruel, torturous kind of execution and brought it back with him to Greece. So though it was initiated apparently by the Persians, it seems to have been introduced into the Mediterranean area by Alexander the Great. And eventually, it was from Alexander's influences that the Romans picked it up. And according to a very common approach in Roman history, when they found something that they liked, they had a way of formalizing, refining it and perfecting it for their own uses. And they did that with crucifixion with their usual high degree of efficiency and skill, they made crucifixion into something amazingly effective. And around the time of Jesus Christ, something in excess of 30,000 people were crucified.

Usually, the cross was composed of two parts. The upright post and the cross arm, as it was called.

Most frequently, the cross arm was placed on the top of the post in a fashion of a T, sometimes dropped two or three feet down in the common tradition of Christianity. We normally see crosses represented that way; although there may be better archeological evidence that Jesus was crucified on a cross shaped like a T. It was customary, however, for the condemned man to carry the cross arm. Apparently, the cross arm would weigh at least 100 to 125 pounds, and from the prison to the place of execution, this was what was to be done. The man would carry the cross arm down a prescribed path so that the whole world would know that he was a guilty criminal. And coming alongside or in front of him was a man holding a sign that indicated his accusation. Now, this didn't occur until after the individual had been whipped or beaten. So carrying that cross arm in and of itself would have been an excruciating, agonizing experience.

Backing up a little bit from that, just to set the scene so you'll understand a little of what Christ underwent, we go back to the Garden of Gethsemane. And there in the garden, Jesus vividly can anticipate the reality of death on the cross. Here is the pristine, spotless, sinless, blameless, flawless Son of God, who is not only not sinful but not even able to look upon sin of purer eyes than to ever behold evil. And in seeing that, the repercussion to His physical frame is literally devastating.

And a Dr. C. Truman Davis, an MD, has said that He suffered in the garden the rare phenomenon of *hematodrosis*, a bloody kind of sweat. And according to Dr. Davis, this is a rather well-documented phenomenon occurring under great emotional stress when tiny capillaries in the sweat glands break, thus mixing blood with sweat. The process alone could have produce marked weakness and possible shock. The emotional impact of the anticipation of sin bearing could have killed a lesser than Christ. And our Lord endured even that agony enough to be taken for His scourging.

Scourging consisted, for the most part, of tying the wrists of a victim with a rope to a post or to a hook hanging out of the ceiling so that his feet were suspended from the floor. Consequently, his body was stretched as far as it could be stretched. The Romans, for the most part, used a rather short whip consisting of many heavy strands and strips of thick leather thongs. On the end of it, there were balls of leather or, sometimes, loops of leather in which there were stones with jagged edges. The one who did the scourging would begin to whip the back, at which point, lacerations would occur. And with each succeeding blow, they would deepen and deepen and deepen into the subcutaneous tissue.

There was an ancient law, you'll remember, in Israel that said 40 lashes was the limit. And so the Pharisees always stopped at 39, legalists that they were. But there's no reason to believe that the Romans cared at all for the Jewish law, so we don't know how many times they lacerated the back of Jesus. In addition to what He had suffered in the garden, He has now suffered this terrible scourging. The half-fainting body of Jesus would have been cut loose from the hook or the post to slump in the stone pavement in His own blood.

And then the task that He had to face was carrying the cross arm all the way from *Golbotha*, the pavement, clear to the top of the Hill of the Skull, *Golgotha*, an agonizing, embarrassing, humiliating act of suffering. When they finally would reach the hill, they would then attach the cross arm to the upright post, and then they would proceed to nail the victim to it. Contrary to popular opinion, it's unlikely that they nailed Him through His hands because the bones in the hands could not support the weight of the body and would have torn through His fingers. It's much more likely that they anchored Him by driving the square nail right through the center of His wrist.

And by the way, when I was in Scotland, there was a very interesting thing that a man came to me who was not a Christian. But He knew I was going to speak on Christ. And somebody had invited him to come, and he was part of a very large corporation in Scotland who had done some digging in the earth for some kind of excavation related to mining. And when they had dug deeply down into the earth, they had discovered an amazing cache, c-a-c-h-e, of Roman hardware. And they immediately called on archaeologists, all of whom came rushing to that part of the earth, and that's just a few years back, to discover boxes and boxes of construction material that were planned to be used by the Romans for building certain edifices in the land of England. And they began to do their research, and they gated all of this at exactly the time of Christ, somewhere from 1 AD to 60 AD. One thing that they found were thousands and thousands of nails. And this dear man brought me a description of all of this and two Roman nails, not unlike those that may have been used...though much smaller were the nails I found...not unlike those that may have been used to nail Jesus there, rough, square nails.

Those would be pounded through His wrists to anchor Him to the cross arm. In most cases, from what we find in archaeology, the left foot - or right foot, whichever was first - would be pressed against the other foot, stretched down as far as possible and then a nail driven straight through the arch of both feet, leaving the knees moderately flexed so that the body literally hung on these three great wounds. And thus was the Lord crucified. Obviously, He would do all that He could to hold Himself up so that He could minimize the pain in His hands, thus thrusting all of the weight on His feet and suffering excruciatingly there. Or else He would change and bear it on His hands and suspend His feet if at all possible but after awhile would be unable to resist the sagging. Excruciating pain with fire to the brain. Pressure would be applied to the median nerves. The arms would become fatigued. Great waves of cramps would begin to sweep over the muscles as the hours passed, knotting them in deep, relentless, throbbing pain. And with those cramps would come the inability to push Himself upward to relieve any of the pressure.

Hanging by His arms, the pectoral muscles would soon become paralyzed, and air could be drawn into the lungs, but it couldn't be easily expelled. And He would try to lift His body to expel it, but soon he wouldn't have the strength to even do that. And so He would be gasping for His breath. If you wonder why there are only seven things that He said on the cross, very brief things, it probably was because it took such a tremendous amount of effort to say anything. Jesus would fight to raise Himself in order to get one short breath. Carbon dioxide would build up into the lungs and the bloodstream until ultimately suffocation would occur."

Dr. Truman Davis again says, "Hours of this limitless pain, cycles of twisting, joint-rendering cramps, intermittent affixation, searing pain as tissue is torn from His lacerated back as He moves up and down against the rough timber. And then another agony begins, the deep crushing pain, deep in the chest, as the pericardium slowly fills with scorum and begins to compress the heart. The compressed heart is struggling to pump heavy, thick, sluggish blood into the tissues. The tortured lungs make frantic efforts to gasp in small gulps of air. The dehydrated tissues send their flood of stimuli to the brain. And Jesus gasps, 'I thirst.'"

What a horrible death. What an unexplainable act of human horror against the lovely Son of God. But you know, that's the easy part for Jesus. That's right. Look at 1 Peter chapter 2 for a minute. 1 Peter chapter 2, verse 21 says this, "For even here unto were ye called because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example that you should follow in His steps who did no sin, neither was deceit found in His mouth who, when He was reviled, reviled not again. When He suffered, He threatened not but committed to Him that judgeth righteously." In other words, all Peter is saying there is He did

it willingly. He did it willingly. He took it without a word, without a whimper, without a complaint.

Why? Verse 24, "Because He was in His own self bearing our sins in His own body on the tree, that we being dead to sin should live unto righteousness by whose stripes you were healed." The easy part was the physical pain. The hard part was the sin-bearing. And so, beloved, when we remember the cross, when we gather at the Lord's Table, we are not simply remembering the agony of a martyr. We are remembering the act of a sin-bearer. We are not simply focusing on somebody who went through a terrible death for a cause. We are focusing on one who bore our sins in His own body, that He might give to us His very righteousness. I think as much as the pain killed Him in the physical sense, the agony of sin had all the more to do with it.

And so we remember the cross. And for Christians, it's a sweet remembrance believe it or not. You know, we are the only people in the world who have as the symbol of our joy an instrument of torture. Do you know that? Do you know any religious group that wears a rack around their neck? Do you know anybody that carries a machine gun around their neck as a symbol? Do you know anybody that carries a guillotine as the emblem of their fellowship. We are the only people in the world who have a torture instrument as a symbol. We're the only people who take it and stick it up in our churches so the whole world can see. Why? Because for us it's a sign of joy, isn't it? Because of all the sin that He bore there, we do not have to bear our sin.

And so we say with Paul, "I preach Christ crucified." We say again with Paul, "I am determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified." We say with Paul, "And God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me and I unto the world." Paul says the greatest thing in my life is the cross. And we sing, "In the cross of Christ I glory, towering o'er the wrecks of time. All the light of sacred story gathers in its head sublime." We sing, "I love that old cross, where the dearest and best for a world of lost sinners was slain." And then we sing, "So I'll cherish the old rugged cross." What kind of fools are we to take as the emblem of our very relationship with the Living God the symbol of our songs?, the moniker of our faith a cross?

Listen, it is because of what the cross meant. We know what it meant for us - salvation, forgiveness, redemption, freedom, eternal life.

But for just a moment tonight, I wanna show you what the cross meant to Jesus. Look at John 14:28. And I don't have time to spend on this in detail, but I love this passage so much, and I want you to see it, if ever so briefly. John 14:28. Now, let me set the scene. Jesus is in the upper room with the disciples. By this time, Judas has been dismissed to go and carry out his foul deed. Only the eleven remain, and they're loyal as far as their loyalty could go. And Jesus has told them that He's gonna leave. Verse 36 of chapter 13, "Simon Peter said, 'Lord, where are You going?' Jesus said, 'Where I go, you can't follow me now, but you'll follow me afterwards.'" In other words, "You're gonna leave us, Lord? You're gonna go away?" And later on, Thomas says in verse 5 of chapter 14, "Lord, we don't know where You're going. And how can we know the way?" Their hearts are broken. And twice in chapter 14, He says to them, "Stop letting your hearts be so troubled." They were literally broken up. He had to say to them in verse 27, "Peace, peace. Calm down. There's nothing to be so upset about."

Why? They were distraught. They were torn apart. Three years of their lives they had given to Jesus. They had followed Him from the first and early days around the shore of Galilee, all the way to cross.

I mean, they had been through it all. They'd said goodbye to their former lives, goodbye to their families, goodbye to their friends, goodbye to their former religion. And they had stepped out, as it were, on an island. And Jesus was the island. And now was the island sinking? To whom would they go? And where would they turn? What resources would they look when they needed their tax money. Jesus found it in the mouth of a fish. When they were hungry, He created food with His bare hands. And when they didn't know the answer, He gave them the answer. And when they were in danger for their lives, He built a wall around them against their enemies. And now He is leaving. And all they can think of is their own plight, their own problems, their own anxiety, their own loss. "Don't do it to us. Don't do it." That's their approach. And so they react in shock, in fear of the lonely helplessness that will follow. They're not unlike a lot of people who can only see things in relation to themselves. It's very shortsighted and very selfish. They never thought for a minute about Jesus.

In fact, even earlier in chapter 13, when the Lord was preparing His own heart for His death, they were fighting about who was gonna be the greatest in the kingdom. Nobody paid a bit of attention toward Him. They were very selfish. And all they could think about was the tragedy that was going to enter into their lives when they lost Jesus. They didn't understand what the cross would mean to Him.

Let's see what it meant to Him. Verse 28, "You have heard how I said unto you, I go away and come again unto you." Stop right there. "You know I'm coming back. You know I'm not gonna leave you totally. I am gonna go away, but I'll be back. But all they could see was Him going away. Oh, it's so sad. He's going away. And you know, I've seen that so many times, even at funerals, where some dear person who loves the Lord Jesus Christ dies and goes to heaven, and yet a partner or somebody in the family is overly despondent week after week, month after month. I've seen it in my own family where a person literally never has recovered from the loss of a mate and literally become almost a vegetable. Why? Selfishness. When a dear saint of God goes to glory to be with Jesus, what's all the sadness about? Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints, right? When a Christian dies, I guess a little sorrow is normal. Some tears are healthy. But constant despair manifests gross selfishness.

James Welden Jones, written the famous poem *Go Down Death*, says this, and it's so graphic, and it's about the death of an old saint down in Georgia. "She saw old death. She saw what we couldn't see. O death coming like a falling star. But death didn't frighten Sister Caroline. He looked to her like a welcome friend. She turned and whispered, 'I'm goin' home.' And she smiled and closed her eyes. And death took her up like a little baby and held her in his icy arms. But she didn't feel no chill. Then death began to ride out beyond the evening star, up beyond the morning star into that glittering light of glory and straight up to the great throne. And there death laid Sister Caroline on the loving breast of Jesus. And Jesus took His own hand and wiped away her tears, and He smoothed the furrows from her brow. And the angels sang a little song, and Jesus rocked her in His arms and kept asayin', 'Take your rest. Take your rest. Take your rest.' 'Weep not,' said the preacher. 'Weep not. She is not dead. She's resting in the arms of Jesus.'" I think he's captured the reality.

Do you look at death how it affects you or how it affects the saint. Look back at the disciples, distressed because all they could see was their own perspective. They never saw what it meant to Jesus. Can I tell you what it meant to Him? Four great things. Four great things. They're gonna come rapidly, so listen.

First, it meant that at last His person would be dignified. His person would be dignified. Look at verse

28 again, "If you loved Me," He says, "you would rejoice because I said I go unto the Father for my Father is greater than I." in other words, he said, "If you really loved Me, you would want to rejoice because I will be ascending to My Father, to the glorious God of heaven." Now, I believe that verse 28 is a reference to our Lord's exaltation. He was leaving the world. He was going to His Father. And the fact that He says, "The Father is greater than I" is a statement coming out of His incarnation. And what He is saying is this: "I have taken the role of a servant," right? "I have set down and set my prerogatives aside as God. I have taken the role of a servant. I have taken a step lower, as it were, then God the Father in subservience. And I will go back to the One I serve to be rewarded, to be exalted, to be glorified for having finished the work." All you have to do is go to the 17th chapter where He prays, "Father, I have finished the work which You gave Me to do. Now, glorify Me with the glory which I had with You before the world began." You see?

If the disciples had really loved Him, they would have rejoiced that He was leaving because His person would be dignified. He would enter back into the presence of God. The humiliation He had known in the earth had been hard and bitter for the sinless Son. He had suffered as a man. He had suffered the hate of men. He had suffered the hate of those He loved eternally and unreservedly. And now, it was almost over, and death was going to release Him. And if they had loved Him in the right way, they'd have rejoiced. But all they could see was themselves.

I suppose I can only weakly imagine how Christ felt in eternal glory, face-to-face, *pro ton theon*, with God, as John calls it. I can only imagine how it must have been to be in the glory of the Trinity. And then all of the sudden, to come to this earth and be spit on and maligned and despised and rejected and hated and mocked and murdered. And He all the time was the Father's beloved. And now He's saying, "I'm going back to the One who is greater than I," not in terms of essence but only in reference to His humiliation. He's going back to the One who sent Him to do the work. He's going to offer the work as finished. And so Jesus saw His death as the dignity of His person to ascend back as it were to the holy hill of God. He had come all the way down to the depths of humiliation and now awaiting Him, the heights of glory.

Secondly, what did Jesus' death mean to Him? Not only that His person would be dignified, but His truth would be documented. His truth would be documented. Verse 29, "And now I have told you before it come to pass that when it is come to pass, you might believe. And hereafter, I'll not talk much with you." This is great. He's saying, "Look, I'm gonna die. And I'm gonna go back so that everything I've been saying to you, you will see come to pass. From here on out, no more talk. Action."

From the very beginning when He came, He said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days, I'll," what, "rebuild it." And He was speaking not of the temple in Jerusalem but the temple of His body. All along, He had said, "I'll die and I'll rise." And He had promised to send the Spirit of God to them. In verse 16, "I will pray to the Father, and He will give you the Comforter." He had promised them the Comforter. He had promised them the Spirit. He had promised them His resurrection. And now He says, "I'm through talking. It's gonna be action. I'm gonna go to the Father, and that means My truth will be documented, for I will rise from the grave, and the Spirit of God will come as I have said. That's what He's saying. "I told you before that when it comes to pass, you might believe." The reason the Bible contains so much prophecy is because God is busy predicting things so that you'll know when they happen that God's involved.

And so they should have been excited about His dying because they should have remembered it

meant His rising. They should have been excited about His going to His Father and His ascension because they would have remembered it meant the sending of the Spirit of Christ, who would dwell in them. If they'd only seen what it meant to Him.

Listen, I think the greatest proof of the deity of Christ and the truth of the Scripture is the fact that God can predict history. Jesus said He would die, and He did. He said He would be lifted up, and He was on the cross. He said He would rise, and He did. He said He would ascend to the Father, and He did. He said He would send the Holy Spirit, and He did. He promised salvation. He promised eternal life, and He gave it just like He said. He promised there would be a supernatural union between a believer and Himself, and that's what happened. He promised that He would put a truth teacher in the heart of every Christian, and He did. He promised peace and joy and love and everything else, and it's ours in Him. In other words, He's saying, "From now on, you're gonna see all come to pass." And knowing that He was going to die, they should have been rubbing their hands together in anticipation of what was gonna happen. "No more talking. from here on, it's action. So His person will be dignified, and His truth will be documented."

And thirdly, what did Jesus' death mean to Him? It meant His foe would be defeated. His foe would be defeated. In a sense, He couldn't wait to get to the cross because it was at the cross that He gave the crushing blow to the skull of Satan, right? Look at verse 30, the second line, "For the prince of this world comes and has nothing on Me." He was anticipating the cross as a conflict with Satan. And Satan was a foe to be defeated.

In fact, He came into the world to destroy the power of Satan. He came into the world to destroy the power to the one who held in his hand death and by death held men in bondage all their lifetime, as Hebrews 2 says. He came to shatter the usurpers kingdom. He came to crush his head as Genesis 3:15 promised He would. Satan all along has been trying to stop Christ. He tried when He was a baby through Herod. And he tried to tempt Him on the way. He tried to shove Him off a cliff. He tried to send his demons to assault Him. He tried by blinding men so they couldn't see the truth. And all along, Satan was just being set up for a crushing blow at the cross. And the disciples should have rejoiced for when He went to the cross, He would do that one thing He came to do - destroy the power of the usurper and wrest out of his hand the title deed to the earth. Satan would be defeated.

And so we say as we look at the cross that what looks like the greatest defeat is really the greatest victory in history. For as Jesus Christ dies on the cross bearing in His body sin, hell is holding, as one man said, high carnival, thinking they've won their day. Three days later, He came bursting out of the tomb. But before even then, while His body was dead, His spirit alive descended into that place where the demons are bound. And as Colossians tell us, He proclaimed His triumph over them in the cross. And then He blasted out of the shackles of death, came bursting out of the tomb, shattering the Roman shield and is alive for evermore. And Satan is a vanquished foe. Satan shot every gun he had at Christ, and they couldn't pull it off. He's alive. So the disciples should rejoice, as He said in verse 28, "If you love Me, you'd rejoice," why, "because My person will be dignified. My truth will be documented. My enemy will be defeated."

And one more: My love will be demonstrated. My love will be demonstrated. Look at verse 31. "But that the world may know," I love this, "that I love the Father." Stop right there. You wanna know something, we don't think about that very often, but the cross is not only a great statement of Christ's love for us. It's great statement of His love for the Father. Do you know that? Who sent Him to die on the cross? The Father. Who commanded Him to come and do that? The Father. And that's what He

says, "And as the Father gave me commandment, even so I do." In other words, the greatest proof of love is what? Obedience. And He is saying, "When I go to the cross, I will prove to the world that I love the Father. Oh, He had claimed to love the Father already in this chapter. Verse 21, verse 23. But it's one thing to claim it. It's something else to verify it. And so He says, "By going to the cross and dying the death, I will prove My love for the Father." That's what Jesus' death meant to Him.

So beloved, as we approach the table, as we focus on the cross tonight, don't look at it so much - this time - from your viewpoint. Although it's wonderful to think of what the cross means to us, and we have thought about that. Think of what it meant for Him. Think what it meant after all those years of humiliation that He would finally be glorified. Think that it meant all the promises He had made would finally be culminating and come to pass. Think that it meant the enemy which had dogged His steps through all the 33 years of His life would finally receive a crushing blow. Think that it meant He could demonstrate on the greatest stage of the universe in the climatic moment of human history that He loved the Father. That's what the cross meant to Him. And I'll tell you something: I'm thankful for such a Savior, aren't you, who did His work so well He was glorified by the Father, who spoke the truth so perfectly that it all comes to pass, who in Himself contains so much power that all that that forces of hell could throw at Him couldn't hold Him in the grave. And to think that He loves the Father that much and that that same love is granted to us. What a Savior.

Let's pray together. Father, thank you for speaking to us again about our blessed Lord. Thank you that we can see the reality of His death, not just from our viewpoint, but for His, which only enhances our own perspective. Father, we're grateful. We don't know always how to express that gratitude, but we're grateful for the Lord Jesus Christ, that He fulfilled completely Your will as the perfect servant. Prepare our hearts, Lord, as we remember His death and as we celebrate His living presence.

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