

## UNIT THREE: JESUS

### SESSION FOURTEEN: JESUS' PASSION, PART 2

#### **Summary of the Fourteenth Session of the Course**

This session did not go so well as the first discussion of Jesus' passion. The group found parts of the presented material confusing, and we determined the problem to be that I was presenting in a critical way long-standing ideas about Jesus' crucifixion that the people in the group had never held. So, at least partially, I was explaining problems the group had never felt or even considered. I was, in effect, trying to cure a disease no one had.

Nonetheless, these long-standing views of Jesus' crucifixion have greatly influenced the church and, almost undoubtedly, have had some influence upon our own thinking, as well, even if we don't realize it. The images are in our hymns, lessons, and popular understandings of Christian faith in the Son of God who was crucified for us.

#### **Holy Week continued**

We continued our overview of the events of what we now call Holy Week, the final week of Jesus' life. The week begins with Palm Sunday and ends with Good Friday.

There was some discussion of the oddity of the triumphal entry in Jerusalem. The group noticed what many have: that the apparently deliberate act of declaring himself the Messiah by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey (fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah) seems out of character for Jesus. The entry seems to have no purpose but to fulfill the prophecy and confront Jerusalem with the Messiah's coming. Jesus' action is provocative. The city is filled with pilgrims for Passover, and the Romans are watching. Jesus antagonizes the Jewish authorities in the city and continues antagonizing them throughout the week. They could, of course, welcome his coming and the kingdom of God he proclaims, but he seems to know they will not. He has put himself on a collision course with trouble, and he knows it.

The cleansing of the temple (overturning the tables of the money changers and pigeon sellers) adds to the antagonism of the authorities. They respond by attempting to discredit Jesus. The Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians all ask him questions designed to entrap him, but they all fail. So, they plot secretly to get rid of him. Most of all, they question Jesus' authority. Who is he to say the things he teaches and assert himself against the Jerusalem establishment? Where does he get the authority to support his actions?

It occurred to me that conflicts in the churches are almost always about authority. Behind all the hot issues that divide Christians lies the real issue, which is authority. Whether the debate concerns biblical interpretation, abortion, the ordination of homosexual Christians, or just about any other divisive question, the real issue seems always to be authority.

We had discussed the Last Supper the previous week, and so we continued our look at Maundy Thursday by going to Gethsemane. Someone asked how we know what Jesus prayed in the garden when he was alone. This question has been raised often by biblical commentators, and the answers depend upon the interpreter's understandings of biblical inspiration. Those who think God dictated the Bible word for word have no difficulty with the question, because God would obviously know what Jesus prayed. Those who allow some freedom to the gospel writers suggest that Jesus must have told them, after his resurrection, about his prayer in the garden. Others suspect the gospels and the oral and written traditions behind them have put Jesus' conflict and deadly but faithful choice into a prayer. His desire to be delivered from the suffering, shame, and death of crucifixion are overcome by his commitment to doing the will of his Father. His prayer (Abba means Father and almost Dad) shows the intimacy and trust in his relationship with God. He does not want to die, but he will not turn from the purpose for which God sent him. He will not abandon the good news he proclaims, the grace he offers the poor and sinful, or the determination of God to reclaim the world through a love that is willing to suffer.

After Jesus' arrest, he is put on trial twice. His first trial is before the Sanhedrin, the high Jewish council, and the charge is blasphemy. He has, they say, not only spoken falsely of God and sullied God's holiness, but also put himself forward as having an authority from God no human being can have. He has exalted himself. The Sanhedrin finds him guilty and declares that he deserves to be put to death. Next, he is handed over to the Romans – to Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator of Jerusalem. In this trial, the charge appears to be sedition. The Romans supposedly reserved crucifixion as the deliberately horrible means for executing rebellious slaves and rebels against the empire. In more normal capital cases, the condemned person was executed with arrows. The gospels present Pilate as unconvinced of Jesus' guilt but unwilling to risk the wrath of Tiberius Caesar, especially since Jerusalem is such a hotbed for insurrection and Pilate has already been in trouble with Caesar. So, Jesus is condemned to be executed by crucifixion.

Shame is a major factor in the suffering or passion of Jesus. We discussed the difficulty westerners have understanding the depth of suffering produced by shame in eastern cultures. One person suggested the Oriental idea of losing face, and we discussed the Near Eastern image for shaming one's family – having kicked dust into the family's face. Jesus is deliberately and systematically put to shame. The soldiers mock and beat him, and they spit into his face. The crown of thorns is a painful (thorns pushed down into his scalp) way of taunting him. In his culture, an accused person who made no defense accepted guilt and its accompanying shame. Plus, crucifixion itself is designed to maximize both pain and shame.

The person to be crucified carries his own crossbeam, not the whole cross which would be much too heavy and cumbersome. One nail is driven through each hand or wrist (which place is still

debated), and one nail is driven through both feet together. The great pain comes, not from the nails themselves, but from the tearing caused by hanging the body from limbs too weak to support it for long in that fashion. As the hours and sometimes even days pass, the pain increases as torn ligaments and tendons swell and continue to be wrenched by the victim's writhing and jerking. If the person hangs limp, he will begin to suffocate; so, he pushes up on the nail through his feet, allowing himself to breathe but also increasing his pain. He cannot hold that position, and so he crashes back down, tearing his body further each time.

I have read that crucified people became enraged and often cursed and shouted at the people standing around them. They are pinned in humiliation and torment while others watch and even make fun of them. They are made helpless. They become incontinent and are further shamed. Their rage is ineffective and may be used to mock them further. The same tactics are used in other forms of torture where mockery of the victim's helplessness is used to increase the torment and inflame the rage which is further taunted.

When the victims legs are finally broken (an act of mercy), he is allowed to suffocate because he can no longer push up on the nail through his feet. Then death comes as his savior.

## **Abandonment**

Jesus is abandoned by his followers, denied by one of his closest friends, and betrayed by another. The worst crisis, however, comes on the cross. "My God, my God," he cries out, "why have you forsaken me?"

The words quote Psalm 22, a psalm of anguish and lament that ends with God's deliverance of the person suffering. Sometimes, by appealing to the psalm and the idea that Jesus was just quoting scripture, scholars have downplayed any thought of Jesus' having actually been abandoned by God. Others have theorized that God the Father turns away from Jesus at the point where Jesus is bearing the sins of the world because God is too holy to look upon sin. These explanations, while not necessarily without any validity, sterilize Jesus' abandonment and depersonalize it.

The Protestant theologian Jurgen Moltmann (especially in his book, *The Crucified God*) offers a more helpful explanation. In his apparent (certainly felt) abandonment by God, Jesus is united with all the world's people who live in what they experience and feel as God's absence. He is one with the God-forsaken. We may argue, as believers, that they are not truly God-forsaken, just as we may argue that Jesus is not truly God-forsaken, either; but neither they nor he can hear us in the time of their abandonment. He, however, is their Savior because he becomes one of them and one with them. Moreover, Jesus' unity with the God-forsaken is not limited to the brief time he feels God-forsaken before dying; he continues to be united with those who suffer and cry out to what they perceive to be an empty sky. He has had his resurrection, but they have not had theirs. They still live on the Good-Friday side of the cross.

That Jesus dies and is buried is very important. Contrary to the theories of people such as Mary Baker Eddy, he does not simply pass out, to be revived later by the cool air in the tomb. He is dead: “crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell.” The problem in that line from the Apostles’ Creed is the word “hell.” In Hebrew, the concept is that of Sheol, the place of the dead. Sheol is a place of empty shadows, of nothingness, where there is no life and the dead cannot praise Yahweh. The Creed tells us that Jesus died in the fullest sense of what it means to die. He went to the depths of death, whatever that may entail. We have not experienced it, but he has. So, we don’t need to be able to spell it out perfectly; we just need to know he went there. As much as a person can die in life and in literal death, he died to the full.

## **Why and How?**

Most basic to Christian faith is our belief that Jesus suffered and died *for us* and that his suffering and death have become our salvation. So, the second-most basic answer to the question of *why* is that he did it *for us and for our salvation*. The most basic answer is that he did it *for God*. In Gethsemane, the whole matter comes down to God’s will: God’s unwillingness to give up humanity to destruction, to lose us. God loves with a love that is willing to suffer rather than lose us, and Jesus takes that love to its completion.

How Jesus’ suffering and death accomplish our salvation is another question. Here, we get into atonement theories: attempts by the church to explain what Jesus did for us and how it is *effective* for our salvation.

There have been various explanations, and no one will ever tell the whole story. The task here is to explain what Jesus has done for us in a way that connects with our lives, makes sense to us, and challenges us to respond with faith. So, the explanations are conditioned, not only by the crucifixion itself and the biblical witnesses to it, but by the times and circumstances of those called to believe.

One of the most traditionally popular ways of explaining the crucifixion has been as a sacrifice, specifically a sacrifice for the removal of sin. A cleansing by blood. A satisfaction of the just wrath of God at humanity’s evils. An atonement for sin.

In this explanation, Jesus is the perfect lamb without blemish – the only one good enough to be a sacrifice for the removal of sin. Only his blood will suffice. One of our hymns says: “There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin; he only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in.” That very hymn, however, also brings love back into the sacrifice: “O dearly, dearly has He loved, And we must love Him too. . . .”

The first problem with the sacrificial explanation is inherent in the sacrificial system itself, as repeatedly condemned by Israel’s prophets: it becomes mechanical, almost magical. The prophets attacked the making of sacrifices as a poor substitute for true repentance and real confrontation with

sin. The sacrifice supposedly just washed the sin away, but the person often remained unchanged and not even truly repentant. The sacrifice was used as a quick fix, a phony solution, a cover-up. The same problem has persisted in the sacrificial understanding of Jesus' crucifixion. People get washed in the blood of the Lamb as an alternative to really dealing with themselves, others, and God. Salvation becomes mechanical: believe the right beliefs, say the right words, experience (or fake) the right emotions, and you're saved. Just like that.

Another problem in the sacrificial explanation of Jesus' crucifixion is our distance these days from the sacrificial system and any real understanding of it. How does blood wash away sin? How does his sacrificing himself help me? And can one sacrificial act (however great) actually wipe away all the evils and atrocities of human life and history? Some people have found that whole idea to be deeply immoral. *Just accept Jesus' sacrifice, and all your sins are taken away* – instant cure, immediate pardon, quick and permanent fix. Never mind the damage done, the lives ruined, and the wreckage still left. How convenient!

To the idea of sacrifice has been added the theory of *substitutionary atonement*. Jesus took my place on the cross. He suffered for me what I deserve. "Bearing shame and scoffing rude," says another hymn, "in my place condemned he stood, sealed my pardon with his blood. Hallelujah, what a Savior!" As Douglas John Hall points out in his book, *Professing the Faith*, the idea of substitution made sense in the world of Anselm of Canterbury who developed the theory and even in the world of John Calvin. It makes much less sense in our world. What is really missing in the theory, however, is any real engagement of me as a person in my own salvation. It all happens without my participation. I would be condemned (Do I really feel that condemnation?), but I am not because Jesus allowed himself to be condemned for me and took my place at the execution. So, we spend much time and effort trying to convince people they are condemned sinners so we can offer them a quick and easy pardon.

Next, add the bargain between God and Satan. In this theory, Satan possesses our souls, but Jesus pays the price to get them back. If the sacrifice of Jesus pays the price demanded by God for sin, this theory has Jesus paying the price demanded by Satan. The same problem persists: my salvation does not engage me at all, except that I must believe it happened. Here, Jesus has no real relation to me, and the whole transaction for my soul takes place in the realm of the supernatural, between God and Satan. I am more a commodity (a soul to be ransomed) than a person. The problem of my damnation or salvation is too big for me to solve, but that's okay because it is solved for me at a level much too high for me to understand. Settled and done. Problem identified, problem solved at God's level, but nothing identified or changed at my level.

I am not making light of any of these attempts to explain why and how Jesus' crucifixion works for our salvation. Each has its time and place, and each continues to make its contribution to our understanding and our faith. Certainly, Jesus did sacrifice himself. And he did suffer innocently for the world's guilty people, including me. And, yes, evil is bigger than I am and deeper than my own particular sins or failings, and so, in that sense, Satan does have our "souls." I am faced with a problem I cannot solve by myself, *but the solution should not be without my participation*. Not

just my state of being or my eternal destiny, but I myself as a living person interacting every day with other people should be changed.

### **Another Attempt**

In his suffering and death, Jesus *represents* both God and humanity. On his cross, we see the rejected God, and God sees the sinful, suffering, and lost human being. In his passion, Jesus is united with all this world's people who suffer (deservedly or undeservedly), with all who are put to shame, with all who are guilty of sin, with all who are lost or trapped. He is the addict, the outcast, the sinner. Paul goes so far (in II Corinthians 5:21) as to say Jesus "became sin." At the same time and in the same body, Jesus is the rejected, angry, and grief-stricken God torn apart both by humanity's refusal of God's love and by the evils and cruelties people inflict upon each other. In that sense, the suffering (the passion) we see on the cross has been God's passion all along.

So, in this terrible event, God's love, anger, and grief come together with our own anger, grief, confusion, guilt, and shame. All it is to be human is torn apart, and all it is to be God is torn apart, too.

The crucifixion is God's supreme confrontation with us and our supreme confrontation with God. God's love meets our hatred, but also our need for God and for each other, our aloneness, our lostness, our helplessness, and our failure.

We discussed my idea that, for God, the crucifixion is still as much a present event and reality as it was on the day it happened. God cannot put the crucifixion behind God's deepest self and move on. I do not pretend to understand eternity or the eternal; theologians have attempted to explain how all times can be equally present to God, but I will not. Yet, even within the range of human experience, the past can remain a present reality for those who have suffered deeply enough. Combat veterans have told me the war, though decades past, is still with them; it never fades into the past. Add to that reality of even human experience the understanding that God sees Jesus' crucifixion in every person's suffering and death, and you have a very powerful knowledge of God and of God's love.

In several sermons, I have called September 11, 2001 a cruciform event – an event in which God sees the form of Jesus' crucifixion in the suffering and death of people – and we can see Jesus' crucifixion in it, too. Certainly, the Holocaust was (and for God still is) a cruciform event – the torture, murder, and humiliation of the beloved people. What happened in the killing fields of Cambodia is cruciform. The execution of some 200,000 Central American people by death squads is cruciform. The death of a child with cancer is cruciform. The slave ships were a form of the cross. Jesus says, "As you have done it to one of the least important of these, my brothers and sisters, you have done it to me." I believe God sees it done every day – just what was done to Jesus. At the same time, I believe, God sees (and feels) the need, the hurt, and the anger in human experience.

How does Jesus' crucifixion move us, change us, and give us life? How does it become our salvation? Without tossing out the other explanations, I would add this one: it keeps God and us connected, bound to each other, in the most extreme act of love, hate, anger, longing, shame, and honor that has ever occurred. And it shows us (and demands we feel) the love, hate, anger, grief, shame, and honor in all human suffering and sin. Jesus represents us to God and God to us. He also represents us to each other and God's love *for the other person* to each of us.

How can God look at the destruction of a human being without seeing Jesus' destruction on the cross? Shame has a face to God, and it is the human face of God's Son. Sin has the same face, that of Jesus. And, for us, God's love has a reality in human flesh and blood. Can love get any more real than that?

Faith does not respond to a mere idea but to a person – a living person suffering and dying because God will not give us up or give up on us. That's how much God loves us. And that's what we do to God and to each other. Not just our prejudice and hatred, our cruelties and brutalities, but also our indifference crucifies God. When we refuse to care, we drive in the nails.

### **Never Finished**

Our salvation comes, not from explanations of the meaning and effectiveness of Jesus' crucifixion, but from the man himself who suffered and died on that cross for God's sake and ours. We will never fully understand. But, then, we never fully understand even human love. It's always greater and deeper than we can put into words or even thoughts. We need to try to understand, but we will never reach the end of trying. Even so, love is not given to be explained but to be received and returned, to be known and shared. And to be trusted.