I find it hard to describe what the Lord has been doing in my heart as we have followed Jesus from His entry into Jerusalem on the Sunday before Passover up to Pilate turning Jesus over to be crucified. All of it — especially last Sunday’s study — is so essential for us to grasp the weight of the cosmic spectacle set before us this morning as we look at THREE CROSSES on a hill outside the walls of Jerusalem.

Luke 23:26; 32-49 And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus....

32 Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 33 And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. 34 And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And they cast lots to divide his garments. 35 And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” 36 The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine 37 and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” 38 There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

39 One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” 40 But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” 42 And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” 43 And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

44 It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, 45 while the sun’s light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. 46 Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last. 47 Now
when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, “Certainly this man was innocent!” 48 And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. 49 And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things.

Crucifixion was common practice within the Roman Empire. Tens of thousands were crucified. Following the failed rebellion of Spartacus 6,000 of his followers were crucified in one day along the shoulder of 120 miles of highway. Imagine traveling from Auburn to San Francisco and along the way you saw on the shoulder of the road for 120 miles 6,000 men nailed to crosses — 50 men/mile — baking in the heat of the noon day sun. And because crucifixion was such a protracted means of execution — birds would peck away at their bodies — eat the eyes out of their sockets. By the way — we think of the cross as being high above ground level and the crowd. But the victim usually hung at eye level — often times naked! The purpose was to add humiliation to your suffering — so people could look you in the eyes and spit on you. Because you could hang on the cross for days, wild beasts would come and start eating you from the feet upward — maybe while you were still alive! That is exactly what the religious rulers so desperately wanted Pilate to do to Jesus!


John 19:16-17 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.

They would have laid the crossbeam of the cross (100-110 pounds of rough, unfinished wood) on the shoulders of Jesus that had been torn to shreds by the Roman scourge. Jesus was then placed in the center of a quarterion, a company of four Roman soldiers and forced to carry his own cross bar out of the Antonia fortress — out the Damascus gate, then some 650 yards to the “Place of the Skull.” This was a very deliberate spectacle intended to strike fear in the hearts and minds of as many people as possible as a deterrent to crime.¹ A fifth soldier

¹“Martin Hengel, Crucifixion (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), p. 50, explains: “Quintillian could therefore praise the crucifixion as a good work: in his view the crosses ought to be set on the busiest roads.”
went in front of them carrying a wooden placard with a whited out background and black letters that stated the charges that warranted death by crucifixion: “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” (John 19:19).

By now Jesus is experiencing complete physical exhaustion. He has been awake for over 24 hours — has endured the crushing agony of soul that led to Hematidrosis in the Garden of Gethsemane — has walked miles across the city of Jerusalem — has experienced the severe beating at the house of the high priest — the Scourging and Crown of Thorns at the Antonia Fortress. Exhausted — Jesus collapsed under the weight of the patibulum, unable to carry it alone. The body of Jesus simply couldn’t bear up under the weight of the patibulum. Luke tells us (Luke 23:26) the Roman soldiers seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus.


32 Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 33 And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

When Jesus finally arrived at the place of the skull Simon threw the patibulum to the ground. The soldiers tore the clothes off the back of Jesus and threw Him in the dirt with the patibulum under his neck. Jesus the carpenter, had driven many nails into wood. But now — as he laid on his back in the dirt Roman soldiers fastened his hands to the patibulum with wrought iron nails.

Here’s how they did it. The Soldiers took his hand, stretched His arm out and laid His hand and wrist on the Patibulum — felt for the space between the radius and ulna — then drove a wrought iron nail through His wrist — fastening Jesus to the cross beam. Then they would have coldly done the same to the other wrist. Then they would have lifted Jesus up from the ground — the weight of His body born by the nails in his hands. With a horrific jolt they would drop the cross beam into a notch in the vertical piece of wood — known as the stipes. They would then turn His feet sideways and with one nail fasten both of them to the Stipes with a single nail.
They did the same thing to the two thieves — one on His left and one on his right.

THREE CROSSES! That is not by chance or coincidence. Fifty days after this — on the day of Pentecost — the apostle Peter preached the first sermon in the history of the church. In it, Peter said that the death of Jesus was according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God; everything about it! It was no mistake that there were three crosses. It was no mistake the Jesus was crucified between two thieves. Those three crosses were center stage in the event all of human history had been moving towards since Genesis 3. Those three crosses bring into full view the truth about God and the truth man.

FIRST — The center cross.

In the cross of Jesus, the matchless love of God is on display heart of God is displayed.

**Romans 5:8** but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

The cross of Jesus reveals — demonstrates — puts on display — the love of God as nothing else in the universe could!

**QUOTE: Kenneth Wuest** — He commends, or rather makes good, presents in its true and unmistakable character, ... His own love toward us.” Vincent comments, “Note the present tense. God continuously establishes His love in that the death of Christ remains as its most striking manifestation.

Remember the word incarnation — *in carnare* — into flesh. God came into human flesh knowing that men would beat his human flesh — knowing that men would shred His human flesh with the scourge — knowing that men would pound thorns into His human flesh — and then drive nails through His human flesh. KNOWING all of this — He came *in carnare*.

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QUOTE: C.S. Lewis; Four Loves — “He creates the universe, already foreseeing—or should we say “seeing”? —the buzzing cloud of flies about the cross, the flayed back pressed against the uneven stake, the nails driven through the medial nerves, the repeated incipient suffocation as the body droops, the repeated torture of back and arms as it is time after time, for breath’s sake hitched up. ..... Herein is love. This is the diagram of Love Himself, the inventor of all loves.”

Luke records for us exactly what happened at the very moment that the soldiers fastened the flesh of God incarnate to the cross

Luke 23:34 KJV — THEN said Jesus — Father forgive them!

THEN is the time stamp for these words. And how the heart of God is on display in this moment! His spontaneous reaction was not Father, wipe them out. Father forgive them was the spontaneous reaction of Jesus towards the ones crucifying Him — as they were driving wrought iron nails through His flesh!

Jesus suffered this pain in the fulness of His humanity! Don’t for a moment think that even a bit of it was muted by His divine nature. Though he experienced the unspeakable pain of crucifixion as man — He understood the sweeping implications of His suffering in the fulness of His deity. Jesus looked at those driving the nails through His body and saw you and me. The cruciari — five Roman soldiers carrying out the execution of Jesus — were our proxies. The force that drove the nails through His hands and feet was not merely the biceps and triceps of a Roman soldier. It was YOUR sin and MY sin — Isaiah 53:5 He was wounded for OUR transgression!

At this point Jesus was in unspeakable agony — His pain was literally excruciating. Did you know that the word excruciating was invented to describe the pain of crucifixion? It literally means – from (ex) the cross (cruciate). Jesus would have experienced excruciating pain shooting up his arms as the nails pressed upon the radial nerves; excruciating headaches.

Contrary to what one would naturally think — Death by crucifixion was not by way of exsanguinations — extreme loss of blood. Crucifixion killed its victims by way of asphyxiation. The posture of the body coupled with how the
incomprehensible physical agony sapped the strength of the victim — made it
difficult for the victim to breath. In order to take the next breath that would keep
him alive — the victim would have to inflict upon himself *excruciating* pain by
pressing down on his feet (that had a nail driven through them) in order to stand
erect and steal a breath. This could — and often did — go on for days. The trauma
of the cross was so brutal that often times, at the foot of the cross would be a
pool of feces and urine — because the victim become incontinent — all of that
mixed with sweat, tears and blood.

THAT is how Jesus suffered — and yet — THAT was nothing compared to the
greatest pain Jesus suffered — the pain of being forsaken by His Father. Martin
Luther was reading the account of the crucifixion — and when he came to Jesus
crying out, “*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*” — he was so
overwhelmed by it that he sat almost frozen for nearly 13 hours!

Finally he said — God forsaken of God! Who can understand it?
The love of God on display in that middle cross

> How deep the Father's love for us  
> How vast beyond all measure  
> That He should give His only Son  
> To make a wretch His treasure  
> How great the pain of searing loss  
> The Father turns His face away  
> As wounds which mar the Chosen One  
> Bring many sons to glory

The cross of Jesus not only put the matchless love of God on display — it also
unmasked the depth of man’s brokenness — how man has (and still does)
respond to act towards God.

> ... And they cast lots to divide his garments.

For myself, this has always been such a disturbing detail in the midst of all of this.
Here were men literally playing games at the foot of the cross of a man they had
just nailed to a cross! They would have been covered with blood. And, without
flinching — they sat down and played a game — gambled for the guy’s clothes.
The quaternion of Roman soldiers are a deeply disturbing display of how bad humans can be. There really are people like that walking around on this planet!

But the Bible tells us why their actions are beyond sociologically and psychologically disturbing: They were playing a game while they were covered with the blood of God become man — while the blood of God incarnate ran down the cross they’d just nailed Him to!

Yet God had even predicted their incredibly disturbing behavior

*John 19:23–24* 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, 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,

But here’s why this observation disturbs me so deeply and so personally: The Roman soldiers put my own heart on display! It was my sin that nailed Jesus to the cross — and for twenty-two years of my life I just played games in the face of it — I continued to live without Him and without regard for Him when it was my sin that nailed Him to the cross.

*35 And the people stood by, watching,*

WOW! They were watching this insane brutality — looking at Jesus whose appearance was now nothing short of hideous — and they were watching at almost eye level.

*but the rulers* (who were watching along with everyone else) *scoffed at him,* saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!”

These were the men who were to be the best and the brightest among the people chosen by God to be a witness to God in the world. And here they were — like a pack of hyenas — howling their insults literally in the face of Jesus.
They were so blind to how blind they were about Jesus that they actually condemned themselves in their attempt to condemn Jesus as a powerless savior. In one breath they actually admitted Jesus had saved others! They couldn’t deny how miraculous and how many times Jesus saved men and women from the realities of life in a fallen and broken world. Jesus performed His first miracle in a village by turning water to wine in order to save a newlywed couple from the humiliation of not having wine for their guests. On several occasions he miraculously saved thousands from hunger. He saved countless men and women from the ravages of disease. He saved people from lives spent in physical blindness. He saved people from crippling diseases and defects. He saved people from the living death of leprosy. He saved men and women from the living nightmare of demonic possession. He even saved people from the grips of the grave. He saved people from living as outcasts in culture — saved people from the hopelessness of being unloved and unlovable.

Yet with their next breath — still looking at Jesus hanging on the cross — they try make Jesus look like a failed savior because Jesus did nothing save Himself.

**QUOTE: David Gooding** — “To mock Christ as the rulers and elders did was sublimely misconceived: they might as well have mocked a literal Passover lamb (in Egypt) because, while it saved others, it could not save itself”

And we don’t want to miss this — Jesus didn’t say a word! Peter would reference this very moment.

*1 Peter 2:23* When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

We need to understand this. There’s a reason why Jesus didn’t save Himself. It is not because He could save Himself. The One who had saved others would not save Himself — would not come down from the cross. Had Jesus saved Himself we would be hopelessly and forever lost!

Jesus didn’t come to save His own life — Jesus came to save US!

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You shall call his name Jesus for He shall SAVE His people from their sin ----
Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord

Jesus didn’t come to save His own life — he came to give it as a ransom for sinners!

Coming down from the Cross would never have proved Him to be the King of Israel — the Savior of the world — the Son of God. Staying on the cross is what proved Him to be King — Savior — and Son

I wonder if Jesus thought “Come down? NO! But I’ll tell you what, in three days I’ll COME UP! Greater than coming down from the cross; He rose from the dead. Yet these same men would not believe in Jesus even then.

Jump down to Verse 39

By the definite plan and foreknowledge of God Jesus didn’t die alone. He was crucified between two thieves because God wanted to put on display for us how humanity is divided into two camps when it comes to Jesus.

Here were two men equally close to death. Within a very short window of time both will be dead. They were not only equally close to death, they were also equally close to salvation because they were equally close to Jesus. One man died and entered eternity forever lost — one man died and entered into paradise with Jesus. The difference was a matter of the heart.

DON’T MISS THIS — Neither one of them could do anything. They were literally nailed down. All they could do was exercise the heart, the tongue, and ears

Both Matthew and Mark tell us that initially both of them were screaming at Jesus and cursing Jesus along with the religious rulers and the soldiers. But Luke tells us that at some point something changed. One of the thieves became silent while the other continued to rant against Jesus.

39 One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!”
“If you’re the Christ — if you really are the messianic king — here’s how I’ll know: Save yourself and us.” God pretty much puts the whole world on display in the way this condemned criminal approached Jesus. “If there’s a God, here is how I’ll know you’re there. Get me out of this.” Or let’s frame it like this — “Here’s how I’ll know you’re God — my life will go the way I know it needs to go.” In reality — the reasoning in that prayer is pretty much the same reason a lot of people give for not believing in God: “I know how my life should go. If there is a God, he must also know. Therefore, if he’s not making my life go the way I think it should go he is either a bad God, a weak God, or non-existent.” The problem with that kind of prayer — that kind of reasoning is that no one really knows how life is actually supposed to go.

None of us have any clue how our lives ought to go. The thief had no clue that the only hope he had in the world (the only hope any of us have) was for Jesus to not come down from the cross!

We don’t want to miss this — Jesus didn’t answer that man on that cross.

But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”

Look at the heart change that is on display from this cross. This thief looks at the other thief and says, “We deserve to be nailed to a cross. We should start to be thinking about the reality that we’re going to be facing God!” He also knew from the way Jesus behaved on the way to the place of the skull, the way that Jesus desired mercy for the men who were driving nails through His hands and feet and the way Jesus silently endured the shameful treatment of the rulers and the soldiers and even his own railings that he was in the presence of innocence!

Then he said something else that revealed what he believed about Jesus

And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”
THAT is amazing faith! A man nailed to a cross believed that the man hanging on the cross next to him was a King with a Kingdom! The only thing that he had as a reference for that was the mocking of those who hated Jesus; the insults of the men who nailed Jesus to the cross and the criminal charges against Jesus fastened to the top of the cross Jesus was nailed to. Here was a man in the darkest imaginable moment — a man who only moments earlier was totally in the dark about Jesus — but the Holy Spirit shined into that man’s heart the light of the knowledge of God in the face of the one hanging on the cross next to him! The word “king” from the mouth of the scoffers and haters of Jesus suddenly sounded like truth. As he read the words “Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews” — the word King started to shine into his heart.

THAT is the greatest miracle in God’s universe! And the Holy Spirit is still doing that same thing in the lives of men and women.

God used this cross to put on display for us how a person responds to Jesus when they begin to understand who Jesus really is. The man on this cross didn’t ask to get off the cross. He didn’t know or understand everything that was going on in his heart concerning Jesus — but here’s what he did know: He just wanted to be with Jesus! All he could say was — Jesus, remember me.

Again — we see the cross of Jesus dividing humanity — we see the cross of Jesus showing the two ways people think of Him. The one thief said — “I want you to save my skin not my soul” whole the other thief said, “I don’t care about my skin; just save me.”

Most of us come to God saying — “I have a problem. If you’re really God you’ll do something about my problem.” But when the Holy Spirit starts to work in your heart you start to change the way you think about your problem and the way you think about Jesus and you start to say, Do what you want with my problems. What I really need is just you.

The response of Jesus is so absolutely, so utterly amazing. And when we read His response let’s bear in mind the kind of agony involved for Jesus to even fill his lungs with enough breath to speak them
Luke 23:43 And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

With those words Jesus puts on display for the whole world to see what GRACE really is!

Jesus did not say one word to this thief about his past — not a word about his crimes — not a word about the insulting words he’d uttered along with the other thief. Jesus did not say one word to him about his past religious performance or his future religious performance. If we framed it in our context Jesus didn’t ask him if he had been baptized or if he tithed — or if he was going to be baptized and tithe. Jesus understood that the only thing that man could exercise was his heart and then his tongue.

**Romans 10:10 NIV** For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.

That it’s an inward exercise.

THREE CROSSES — Jesus crucified at the place of the skull between two men. Both within arm’s length of Jesus. Both able to hear Jesus intercede for the men who nailed Him to His cross. Both able to watch Jesus endure the cruel and shameful insults while enduring excruciating pain. The man on one of the crosses turned away in his heart and stepped into eternity to be forever separated from Jesus who was only arm’s length from him! I wonder if there has ever been a man who was closer to eternal life than the thief who was within arm’s length of Jesus who IS life? The man on the other cross turned to Jesus in his heart. Both men were guilty sinners. The difference them was that one died an unbelieving sinner while the other died a believing sinner.

It is in the heart where we determine our relationship with Jesus!

I want to close by reading to the end of verse 49. Next Sunday I will be in New York for the East Coast Pastors Prayer Gathering — but I will be back for Palm Sunday and we’re going to look at the burial of Jesus — that sets the stage for Easter Sunday!
It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun’s light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last. Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, “Certainly this man was innocent!” And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things.