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Luke 23:32-34

THE HANDS OF THE PASSION: NAIL-PIERCED HANDS

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This is the most difficult day of the year for me. This is Good Friday, the day that our Lord Jesus died on the cross. It is a day of death, but there is more to it than that. Every day is a day of death. You see the obituaries in the newspapers. Most of the people you don't know, some you have at least heard of and some may have touched you in some way. There are those funerals that affect us deeply: a close friend, a teacher, your first boss, your favorite uncle, your grandmother, your brother, your sister, your spouse. Jesus' death is not like any of those, yet it is going to touch us emotionally in a way that even some of those close deaths do not. Jesus died in Jerusalem almost 2000 years ago. None of us can say that we have ever known him in the way that Peter, John, Mary Magdalene, or others in the Scriptures did. Yet his death affects each and every one of us. It is something personal. SEE HIS NAIL-PIERCED HANDS!

Jesus' death affects us personally because it was a death that took place because of us. I can say that I am personally responsible for his death. Every year you read some article about who was responsible for the death of Jesus. Was it the Jewish leaders who had condemned him and demanded his death? Was it Pontius Pilate who ultimately took the responsibility by signing the death warrant? Was it the Roman soldiers who carried out orders by nailing him to the cross? Was it the mob who just got caught up in mass hysteria? How about the ever-popular "society itself" is to blame? Just another example of man's inhumanity to man? We know our natural tendency is to want to shift the blame on anyone and everyone other than ourselves, but that is the ultimate answer. I am responsible for the death of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. My sin caused his death.

Yes, my sin caused his death. This is a day that we don't like because it forces us to see our sin. We get very comfortable with ourselves. We know our weaknesses and honestly, we sometimes see our weaknesses as our strengths. We think of it as character. God calls it sin. Sin separates us from God. Sin brings God's wrath and punishment and justly so. God is a God of absolute justice. God must punish the guilty and he must set the innocent free. God cannot deny himself. God cannot excuse sin and say that it is no big deal. Every sin must be punished and paid for in full.

There are many different words for sin in the Scriptures. It is missing the mark. Imagine a target and you are shooting an arrow. You aim for the bull's eye. Sometimes you hit it, sometimes you are close, and other times you miss the target altogether. God's target is perfection. "Be holy, because I the LORD your God am holy." Anything less than perfection is sin, missing the mark. Sin is transgression, stepping over the line. We have all kinds of boundaries here in this world. I remember well our trip to the Holy Land. We were warned about certain roads that led to other hostile countries just down the path. If you stepped over the line, you could be shot. That is transgression.

Sin is iniquity, unevenness. There are many wonderful things about spring. Potholes are not among them. We know the wonderful joys of running over potholes, blowing tires, and wrecking the rims of our wheels. The roads are not level. We hate those orange barrels that come out this time of year, but they are necessary. We want our roads level and smooth. We do not want iniquity. Sin is wickedness, crookedness. The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. We know that when we go away from the straight path, we can get lost and get into danger. Satan will do everything he can to detour us from the straight path and get us lost. We are so often compared to sheep that lose their way without the guidance of a shepherd.

You want some other names? How about guile, insincerity, lawlessness, selfishness, immorality, evil, corruption, ungodliness, or many more? There are sins of commission and there are sins of omission. Sins of commission are the bad things we do. They are the acts of our sinful nature that all of us are born with. The Apostle Paul says: "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." Sins of omission are the good things that we should be doing to all people at all times but don't because of our own selfishness.

Do you see yourself on that list at least once? That's all it takes. James tells us, "Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." It's all or nothing. You are either perfect or you aren't. Do you really believe that you are perfect and haven't sinned? St. John says, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." Ezekiel says, "The soul that sins is the one that will die," and St. Paul tells us that "the wages of sin is death."

The older I get, the more I am reminded of my sins. I think of those times when I was a boy and disobeyed my parents. I think of times I could have stood up for children who were bullied and made fun of, yet I stood there and said nothing because I didn't want those same bullies to pick on me. I think of the times when I joined in the mocking. I think of the things I did just because my parents didn't want me to do them. I think of the lies I told. I think of the gossip I spread. I think of so many times that I had the opportunity to do the right thing and didn't just because I wanted to get my own way. I think of selfish thoughts, hateful words, and spiteful actions.

I wish that I could say that I left all of that behind at the age of ten or sixteen or 22, but I can't. I think of high school sins, college sins and seminary sins. I think of failures as a husband, as a father, as a pastor. One of the best definitions of our frustrations came from a small child who said, "Sometimes I just can't get rid of the naughties!" Sometimes we just can't get rid of the naughties. The Apostle Paul said it this way: "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing." The only thing I can do is confess my sins and say, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

God is a God of absolute justice. He must punish the guilty. The hymn writer puts it so bluntly: "'Tis I who should be smitten, my doom should here be written: Bound hand and foot in hell. The fetters and the scourging, the floods around you surging, 'Tis I who have deserved them well." And that is why we call this Good Friday. My Savior takes my place. He suffers my punishment. He takes my sins, and he credits me with his righteousness. "What punishment so strange is suffered yonder! The Shepherd dies for sheep that loved to wander; The Master pays the debt his servants owe him, who would not know him."

Good Friday is where we see the justice of God in full force. Sin must be punished. Good Friday is where we see the love of God in full force. Jesus went to the cross in my place. He stepped forward and volunteered to drink the full cup of God's wrath upon sin. We cannot begin to imagine the vile poison in that cup filled to the brim. Jesus couldn't merely taste it and then throw up. He had to drink it in its entirety and keep it down. That was what was happening while he was on that cross. Darkness covered the earth and Jesus would cry out in a loud voice: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

There are things going on here far beyond our comprehension. God is forsaking God. For the first time in all eternity Jesus is no longer in perfect communication with his heavenly Father. This is no longer God's beloved Son with whom God is well pleased. He is the Sin Bearer carrying the sin of every man, woman and child who ever lived. He has your sins on him, sins you remember so well and sins you have long forgotten, sins of thought, word and action, sins against those you love and sins against those you've hated. He takes the punishment for every one of them. "He was

pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

Jesus died willingly. That is what is so hard for us to believe. It’s all spelled out for us in the four Gospels. Jesus was crucified. His hands and feet were pierced with nails and he was hung on the cross in the hot sun. We have once again gone through many of the Lenten texts on Wednesday evenings. We have reviewed our Savior’s love in the face of betrayal, denial, false charges, beatings, mocking and hatred. He went to the cross willingly.

He had been charged with secular crimes, major ones. He was forbidding the payment of taxes to Caesar and calling himself Christ, a king. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor examined him and found him innocent of any charges. Yet the hatred of the Jewish leaders would prevail. Did you catch how they had to finally admit the true reason for their hatred? “We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.” Jesus would be condemned and sentenced to death, not on trumped up liar’s charges, but on the basis of the reality of Jesus’ Sonship with God the Father. This fact can be stated no better than this: “The Jews condemned God’s Son because he was God’s Son.”

Jesus went willingly. Many tried to deter him from going to Jerusalem, but Jesus did as Isaiah had foretold in setting his face like a flint in going there. The soldiers in Gethsemane fell backward at the power of his word, yet Jesus allowed them to bind him and bring him to trial even though twelve legions of angels or 72,000 angels were at his beck and call. He only had to say the word. They mocked his seeming inability to save himself while on the cross, yet he could have come down at any time and destroyed his enemies with the blink of an eye. It wasn’t the nails in his hands and feet that kept him on the cross. It was his love for you and me.

Some will cry as they realize this precious truth. Others will merely think Jesus a fool. He gave his life willingly. It wasn’t Pilate’s orders that brought his death. It was his willingness to die for you and me, to take our sins away and drown them in the depths of the sea. “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

Because Jesus stayed on the cross, you have the absolute certainty that your sins are paid for in full. See his cross and nail-pierced hands and go in peace! May God be with you! AMEN.