

THE DARKEST DAY IN HISTORY

Matthew 27:32-54

Pastor Steve had only been at his new church three months when Sarah, one of the key lay persons, came to him with a problem. In addition to cleaning houses and volunteering at the church, Sarah kept children in her home. Months earlier, before Pastor Steve interviewed for the church, one of the parents of one of the children had Sarah arrested for child abuse. In two weeks Sarah was going to court for a full trial and she wanted her new pastor to stand by her side.

Even though he had known her for only a few months there is no way Pastor Steve could believe Sarah was a child abuser. She taught a preschool Sunday School class and regularly worked in the nursery. He had seen her interact with children. There was no doubt in his mind that this was a miscarriage of justice!

Nothing during the trial changed his mind. The evidence was weak and circumstantial. The character witnesses for Sarah were powerful. After two days of testimony the trial went to the jury. A couple of hours later the jury returned a unanimous verdict, "Not guilty!"

Pastor Steve was relieved. Sarah was ecstatic. She had been completely exonerated, but the damage of the charges had been done. Regardless of her innocence, she would never keep children in her home again. Sadly, the child in question had been abused, just not by Sarah.

Betty was an outstanding fourth grade teacher in a district that boasted the best schools in the state. Betty was especially gifted with students who struggled with some of the basic concepts of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Her best quality was that she really loved her children and viewed teaching as a ministry. Word spread quickly through third grade parents that if your child was struggling, request Betty for fourth grade. She was a real miracle worker.

Because of her success, Betty's class had an unusually high percentage of "below-average" students (whatever that means). As a result, her students' scores on standardized tests were lower than the accepted average. When it came time for her annual review, she was denied tenure and lost her job. The reason for her dismissal, according to the superintendent of schools, was her failure to raise test scores to an acceptable level.

How many times in your life have you said, "That's not fair?" How many times have you been unfairly criticized, accused, or overlooked for a promotion? How many times have you wished God would make things right?

Nothing makes us angrier quicker than injustice done to a friend.

Once, in elementary school I was accused of stealing a boy's eraser. I hadn't stolen it. The truth is it was my eraser and he had stolen it and I was trying to get it back. But the truth didn't matter. I was sent to the principle's office. I got in trouble. No one believed me. At least on that occasion I was completely innocent. That was more than 35 years ago and I remember it like it was yesterday. I still carry the emotional scares of such a miscarriage of justice.

But my experience or Betty's experience or Sarah's experience, pales in comparison to the greatest injustice done to anyone who ever lived. Our justice system is built on the conviction that it is better for a guilty person to go free than for an innocent person to be condemned.

Nothing is worse than an innocent person being found guilty.

But that's exactly what happened with Jesus! He was 100% innocent. Yet He was 100% found guilty. The Apostle Paul put it this way, "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."¹

A Miscarriage of Justice

Nothing cries foul like an innocent man being condemned. The last week of Jesus' life started out with the greatest day in His life. On Sunday He rode into Jerusalem on the back of a colt while thousands of people shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"²

But immediately His popularity started to polarize people. What started out as a celebration ended as a crucifixion. Here is how it happened.

On Monday Jesus goes into a fit of rage and throws the merchants and money changers out of the temple.³ On Tuesday He has a confrontation with the religious leaders about the events that took place on Monday. The rest of Tuesday He spends teaching in parables.⁴ On Wednesday Jesus continues teaching, giving His famous "Greatest Commandment" speech, as well as His sermon on the end of times. Wednesday evening Jesus is in the home of Lazarus where a woman anoints His feet with oil. The day ends with Judas meeting with religious leaders, negotiating the place and price of Jesus' betrayal.⁵

On Thursday, things start coming to a climax. Judas and the authorities have their plan in place. Jesus plans on celebrating the Passover with His disciples over a meal. At the end of the meal, Jesus takes the bread and wine and uses them as an illustration of His broken body and spilt blood. Later that evening, He and His disciples go to a private garden to pray and rest. While praying, a large crowd with swords and clubs surround Jesus. Judas, the leader of the mob, betrays Jesus by kissing Him on the cheek. A skirmish occurs in which Peter cuts an ear off a guy. Jesus heals the man and says, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture Me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest Me." And then the Bible records, "Then all the disciples deserted Him and fled."⁶

After being arrested, late into Thursday evening, Jesus is taken to stand trial before the Jewish religious high court (called the Sanhedrin). His charge is blasphemy. He is found guilty. The sentence for blasphemy is death. It is during this trial that Peter denies being one of Jesus' disciples, even knowing Jesus, three times.⁷

Early Friday morning, before sunrise, Jesus is taken to stand before Pilate, the Roman authority. The Jewish leaders knew that nothing (especially a death sentence) could be carried out without his approval. At first Pilate doesn't approve. He tries to release Jesus, but the crowds (the same crowd that days earlier shouted "Hosanna") now shout "Crucify Him!" Pilate washes his hands to the whole ugly event and then turns Jesus over to the Roman soldiers who beat Him, mock Him and prepare Him for crucifixion.⁸

More than likely, within twelve hours of His arrest, Jesus was beaten, bruised, and hung on a cross...and He was completely innocent of any criminal or religious charges! An incredible display of incompetence and injustice.

How could such a thing happen? It's called "groupthink," where bad (sometimes unspeakable) ideas become acceptable ideas as a result of people conforming to someone's agenda.

Groupthink often leads to a herd mentality, where people simply follow along without questioning why. The religious leaders, with their hidden agenda of getting rid of Jesus,

manipulated the populace and the Roman authorities into accepting what under normal circumstances would have been unacceptable. People have a way of getting caught up in the moment. Don't they?

Some scholars suggest that the Sanhedrin violated 24 Jewish Laws in the way they treated Jesus. Among those violations were condemning the accused on the same day as the trial. It was also against Jewish Law to deal with a capital punishment case at night. A third violation was pronouncing a death penalty outside a specially called meeting in the temple. Furthermore, a trial was not to be held on the eve of the Sabbath or the eve of a festival day. (The day Jesus was arrested, tried, and condemned was the eve of the Passover.) Another violation was not allowing the defense an opportunity to call witnesses on his behalf.

Could such a travesty happen today?

Think about it, and be honest: How many times have you seen someone arrested and immediately presumed he (or she) must have done something wrong or else he (or she) would not have been arrested? A person is supposed to have the presumption of innocence. But we put so much trust in the authorities, and groupthink is so powerful, that people have to *prove* their innocence instead of *disprove* their guilt. We can't judge the people of Jesus' day because most of us would have probably done the same thing.

Here is how Matthew describes what happens next:

As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. They came to a place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. Above his head they placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS. Two robbers were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!"

In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.' "In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him. -

Mark records that Jesus was crucified during the "third hour,"¹⁰ which by their way of calculating time would have been at 9:00 a.m. Friday morning. However, He did not die right away. Death would take hours.

A Loss of Hope

Chances are you have heard the gory details of the crucifixion so many times you have become numb to it. Yes it happened. Yes it was horrible. Yes it was unthinkable. Yes it was unimaginable. But we convince ourselves that it is simply part of the story. We know how the story ends and so we gloss over the atrocity of it all. After all, "It's Friday, but Sunday's coming." Right?

Let's not be so quick to get to Sunday that we miss some incredible, life-changing, principles. Have you lost hope? Have you ever lost hope? Have you ever gone through a moment of life where you thought things could not get any worse...and they do? Do you know someone who is going through such a time right now?

Before we jump to His resurrection, what are some less familiar principles we can learn from Jesus' crucifixion?

Remember, Jesus was as much human as He was God. As a human being He experienced every temptation and every emotion you and I have ever experienced. He knows how you feel because He has felt it. Yes, He is God; and yes, He did overcome everything. But all that means is that He can sympathize with you and give you the strength to overcome as well.

Have you ever had a bad day? I mean a really bad day? Not a bad hair day, or just a rotten day when nothing seemed to go right and you were in a really foul mood. I mean a really, really bad day?

Do you know how you can tell when you are really having a bad day?

First, you know you are having a bad day when your enemies want to crucify you. I know a guy who pastored a church that was at a business meeting that went terribly wrong. At one point in the meeting, a man (who happened to be a deacon and the church treasurer) said to the pastor, in front of everyone, "I don't have any respect for you as a pastor or as a man."

It's one thing to be around people and *wonder* if they like you or not. But it's another thing to be around people and *know* they don't like you. Jesus knew who His enemies were, knew they wanted Him dead, and in the Garden of Gethsemane, those were the people who surrounded Him. It's a bad day when someone wants you dead.—

Second, you know you are having a bad day when your friends desert you. With a kiss Judas betrayed Jesus. But in a flash the rest of the disciples ran away. It's a miserable feeling to be in a position where you need your friends, but they are not there.

Third, you know you are having a bad day when you can't see a brighter tomorrow. As long as you can say, "If I just hang— in there a little longer, I know it will get better," you can find the strength to keep going. It's another thing to lose all hope of things ever getting better. Matthew records, "From the sixth hour (noon) until the ninth hour (3:00 p.m., and remember Jesus had been on the cross since 9:00 a.m.) darkness came over all the land."—

Would the sun (or Son) really come out tomorrow? When you doubt that it will, that's a really bad day.

Fourth, you know you are having a bad day when your religion no longer provides adequate answers. Jesus cried, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?"—

God doesn't answer.

Have you ever been in a situation when what you believed all your life no longer answers your questions in any real and meaningful way? I have, and that's a tough place to be. It's a bad day when that happens. It is tough to pour out your soul to God and God seem like He no longer cares, if He ever cared at all.

Fifth, you know you are having a bad day when your life is being slowly squeezed out of you. It could be financial pressures, family pressures, work pressures, or just about any type of stress. It's hard to keep going when you feel like you are dying.

Now What?

Now, here is the good news. While Jesus' enemies wanted to kill Him and while His friends deserted Him and while there seemed to be no brighter tomorrow and while His religion no longer had the answers and while His life was slowly leaving Him, God was up to something!

God had not forgotten His promises. He had not forsaken His Son. He had not fallen asleep at the wheel.

God was up to something huge! He was up to something that would change everything and make everything worth it.

At the precise moment Jesus died, the curtain in the temple that separated the Holy of Holies (where God resided) from the rest of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.—

What does that mean? In the temple there was a room where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. God dwelt in the Ark of the Covenant. This room was the most holy room in the temple. In deed it was the most holy room in the world. Once a year the high priest, and only the high priest, would go into this room with a sacrifice and ask God to forgive the sins of the people. If anyone else went into the room, at any time, they would immediately be struck dead by God Himself. If the high priest went into this room on any day but the one day a year, he would be struck dead. No exceptions. If there was any unconfessed sin in the life of the high priest, the moment he walked into the room he would die. The priests were not perfect. Any time he walked into this room there was a chance he would die. As a precaution, before entering the room, on this one day a year, the high priest would tie a rope around his waist, leaving the slack in the rope outside the Holy of Holies. This way, if the priest did die, other priests could drag him out of the room without being killed themselves.

This holy room was separated from the rest of the temple by a huge, heavy curtain. The curtain was woven fabric of 72 twisted plaits of 24 threads each and was 60 feet long by 30 feet high. Only God could split it from top to bottom.

The ripping of this veil signified that God was now entering into a new, open relationship with mankind. Now, at anytime, anyone could go to God for forgiveness. No priest was necessary. No sacrifices were necessary. No appointment needed. The moment Jesus died, God declared that through Jesus, all sins have been forgiven, and everyone is welcomed into His presence.

“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, His body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.”—

Some other unusual things happened while the temple veil was being ripped. All were signs that God accepted Jesus’ death as the sacrifice for sins. Nothing would ever be the same again. “The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many people who had died were raised to life.”— I repeat, at the darkest moment imaginable, God was up to something.

Turning a Bad Day Into a Good Day

I have a friend, a retired minister, who is dying of cancer. This man means the world to me. He has had several bad days, but it seems the worse his days the stronger his faith. He is always smiling. While taking chemo he talks to the doctors, nurses, and other patients about Jesus. He prays with them. He is an encouragement to me and everyone who meets him. I pray that on my good days my faith will be half as strong as his faith on his bad days.

If you were to ask him how he can keep going while life is slowly being squeezed out of him, he would tell you, “When life is at its worst, God is at His best.”

That’s the lesson behind the crucifixion!

That's the anchor we tether ourselves to during storms.

That's the promise to which we never let go.

That's how you keep going when you would rather quit.

That's how you turn a bad day (no matter how bad of a day) into a good day.

No matter what you are going through always remember that when life is at its worst God is at His best. That's how the darkest day in history became the greatest day ever. It happened on a Friday, Good Friday, and it only gets better come Easter Sunday.

[1](#) 2 Corinthians 5:21. *The Message* reads, "God put the wrong on Him who never did anything wrong, so we could be put right with God."

[2](#) Matthew 21:9

[3](#) Matthew 21:12-16; Mark 11:15-18; Luke 19:45-47

[4](#) Matthew 21:23-22:14; Mark 11:27-12:12; Luke 20:1-19

[5](#) Matthew 22:15-26:16; Mark 12:15-14:11; Luke 20:20-22:6

[6](#) Matthew 26:17-56; Mark 14:12-52; Luke 22:7-53

[7](#) Matthew 26:57-75; Mark 14:53-72; Luke 22:54-62

[8](#) Matthew 27:11-44; Mark 15:1-32; Luke 22:63-23:43

[9](#) Matthew 27:32-44

[10](#) Mark 15:25

[11](#) Can you not think of an enemy who wants you dead? I can. His name is Lucifer and the Bible says he prowls around like a roaring lion looking for people to devour.

[12](#) I know this is a bad choice of words, but it just seems to fit.

[13](#) Matthew 27:45, parenthesis added for explanation.

[14](#) Matthew 27:46

[15](#) Matthew 27:51

[16](#) Hebrews 10:19-22

[17](#) Matthew 27:52