

“Death Sentence”
1 Corinthians 15:55
Mark 15:33-39

In the first century, the Roman Empire executed criminals by crucifixion. It was intended to be a humiliating and agonizing experience. After the criminal was sentenced to die, they were stripped of their clothes and paraded through the streets of the city, so that their death sentence would be seen by all. The one sentenced to death carried a 50-pound cross-piece (or sometimes the entire cross, which weighed about 200 pounds). And as the convicted criminal stumbled toward their execution, the soldiers would follow closely behind, whipping the person relentlessly.

When they arrived at the place of execution, the criminal would be both nailed and tied by rope to the cross beam and then lifted onto the cross. The criminal would dangle on the cross, which was just above the ground, so that the gathered crowd could look them in the face to taunt, ridicule and torment them. The position in which the condemned criminal hung made it difficult to exhale. That’s why their legs were bent, and their feet nailed near the base of the cross, so they could push their torso a few inches up and gasp for breath, until the pain in their legs became unbearable and they collapsed again. The process of death was intended to be slow and agonizing. Sometimes the one crucified died because of shock or dehydration, but most often it was because they lost their ability to support their weight and therefore suffocated. It was not uncommon for death to take two days. Whenever the authorities decided to expedite the criminal’s death, their legs would be broken so that they could no longer push themselves up for breath.

After Pilate sentenced Jesus to die, he turned Jesus over to the soldiers, whose job was to lead Jesus to his execution. They beat him, spit on him and placed a crown of thorns upon his head. And then followed behind him, all the while whipping him, to the place of his execution.

Jesus died on the cross because that's what it took to bring about humanity's reconciliation with God the Father. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus had prayed, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want." But it was not possible. Jesus had to go to the cross and die the death of a common criminal. Jesus didn't save himself, because he wanted to save humanity. It wasn't the nails that bound him to the cross. It was Jesus' love for humanity that kept him there.

At noon, darkness fell across the whole land until three o'clock. Then, at that time, Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In that one horrifying moment, Jesus experienced separation from God the Father...so that humanity could experience reconciliation with God the Father. Jesus cried "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" so that no one would ever have to cry those words.

Instead of you and me being crucified that day, Jesus took the death sentence that was really ours. Human sin was forgiven that day. Jesus, representing all humans, those past, present and future, was sentenced to death and executed on humanity's behalf, for the benefit of humanity. Humanity is reconciled to God the Father. We are in a right relationship with God. We are forgiven of our sins and receive everlasting life through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. These benefits can belong to anyone who places their trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. According to Isaiah 53:5, "But he (Jesus) was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed."

Through Jesus' earthly obedience, suffering and death, we can experience ongoing and complete healing. 1 Corinthians 15:55 reads, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting." I encourage you to reflect and meditate on the obedience, suffering and death of Jesus:

Remember the Garden. Jesus was all alone in his agony, but you are not alone in yours.

Remember Jesus' trial. Jesus was declared guilty of crimes he did not commit and received a death sentence he did not deserve. Yet, Jesus endured a death sentence, so that you wouldn't.

Remember Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus would not save himself, because he wanted to save you.

Though Jesus' work is finished on the cross, his work is not finished in you. Jesus wants you to experience the fullness of a relationship with God the Father (Creator), Son (Redeemer) and Holy Spirit (Sustainer). God wants you to experience the power of Jesus' earthly obedience, suffering and death. That is why Jesus gave his life for you. Do you believe? Have you placed your faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord? If, not, please consider doing so right now. The benefits of the cross can be yours today. Amen.

*This sermon was preached (Livestream due to the Coronavirus) on Good Friday, 10 April 2020
by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh in his Study at Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California*

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