

March 29, 2013
Questions for Holy Week

Why Suffer?
Matthew 27:45-54

Opening words: There are 52 weeks in every year. Each one is important and not a single one should be wasted. Have you ever stopped to consider how many weeks have occurred in the history of the world? However, there is one week that changed our world forever, Holy Week! On the Christian calendar Holy Week is the last week of Lent, beginning on Palm Sunday and ending at dawn on Easter. It is the week the church remembers the final days of Jesus' earthly ministry. It recalls the expectations of Palm Sunday, the rejection of Maundy Thursday, the devastation of Good Friday and the final victory of Easter morning. During this Holy Week we have been answering the questions that accompany each day.

This is Holy Week. According to the Gospel of Mark, it went this way. May we never forget:

On Sunday, Jesus rode the noble animal to Jerusalem to communicate to everyone he was the Messiah. It was his "point of no return".

On Monday, Jesus cleansed the temple. It has nothing to do with the youth fundraising in the hallway. It has nothing to do with selling dinner tickets to aid the budget. However, it is about religious leaders abusing their position for personal gain.

On Tuesday, Jesus cursed the fig tree. It was the only thing that Jesus cursed. I hope you remember the fig tree symbolized Israel itself. It is like burning an American flag. They got the message.

On Wednesday, Jesus taught in the temple courts about the Kingdom of God. They are some of Jesus' most memorable words. I would encourage you to read them.

On Thursday, Jesus washed the disciple's feet, observed his last Seder, went to the garden to pray, was arrested and was tried by his own people, the Sanhedrin.

This is Friday of Holy Week. We call it Good Friday. However, it wasn't such a good day for Jesus. For on this day we remember how Jesus stood before Pilate, was rejected by the crowd and was abused by the soldiers. This is also the day we struggle with the death of Jesus. May God have mercy on each one of us.

Matthew 27:45-54

⁴⁵ From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. ⁴⁶ About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").

⁴⁷ When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah."

⁴⁸ Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. ⁴⁹ The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him."

⁵⁰ And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

⁵¹ At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split ⁵² and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. ⁵³ They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

⁵⁴ When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"

The end had come. On that day, there is nothing pretty about Jesus. His face is filled with blood from his thorny crown. His back is raw from his flogging and his mind is filled with the verbal abuse. His skin on his hands and feet are ripping from the well-placed nails. If the Romans knew nothing else, they knew how to make people suffer. Countless individuals had suffered at the hands of the Romans. Those agonizing hours on the cross must have felt like days. What complicated the pain was the loneliness. The crowds that came to hear him preach were absent. The people that he healed were gone. The crowd that cheered for him five days earlier had scattered. Except for the thieves on his right and his left, he was alone. The little group that came to support him stood at the foot of the cross. He was too high to be touched. Jesus was alone. The incarnation of God suffered on the cross and the end could not come soon enough.

This is the question of the evening: *why suffer?* After all, we are talking about the God of the universe. We are talking about a God who created this whole world out of nothing. We are talking about a God who is all knowing and all powerful. We are talking about a God who loves mercy and justice. Couldn't this God have found another way to save the world from sin? Why did Jesus have to suffer? Certainly there must have been another way. Why couldn't people just earn their way into heaven? That way everyone would be volunteering to teach Sunday school or work at the soup kitchen. Why couldn't God hide salvation in a secret code or philosophy? That would get people to read their Bibles and pray. Why couldn't God just forgive every one of their sins? After all, God loves everyone. That way the streets of heaven would be filled and the streets of hell empty. But God didn't choose those ways to save the world. God's plan of salvation included Jesus suffering on the cross. The question is not if he suffered. The question is why did he suffer?

This evening I want to answer that question. Jesus suffered for three reasons. First, he suffered to fulfill prophecy. Second, he suffered to demonstrate his love. Third and finally, he suffered to be the perfect sacrifice. The Apostle Paul knew the significance of the cross.

Romans 6:23 says, "*For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" Let us look at them one at a time.

Fulfillment of Prophecy

Years ago, there was a man who spoke on behalf of God. He was a contemporary of Amos, Hosea and Micah. His name meant "The Lord Saves." However, we simply call him Isaiah. He is considered to be the greatest of the writing prophets. That is a good thing, because he had a great deal to say. His ministry began about the year 740 BC. It was a great time of turmoil. The word for his generation was 'change'. Everything was changing in their world. The Assyrian Empire was expanding; the nation of Israel was declining. God's Chosen people were facing a questionable future. Their national security was slipping away. It is for this reason Isaiah's themes of God's judgment and salvation resonated with the people.

His most famous words can be found in the fifty-third chapter. These words meant very little to his generation. They had their own short sighted problems. However, to our generations they point clearly to Jesus on the cross. May God give you ears to hear.

³ He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

⁴ Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.

⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
Yet who of his generation protested?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was punished.

⁹ He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,

though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.

¹⁰ Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

First, Jesus suffered on the cross to fulfill the prophecy. Who are we to question God's ways? The suffering was all part of the divine plan. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Demonstration of Love

William Gladstone (1809-1898), in announcing the death of Princess Alice to the House of Commons, told a touching story. The little daughter of the Princess was seriously ill with diphtheria. The doctors told the princess not to kiss her little daughter and endanger her life by breathing the child's breath. Once when the child was struggling to breathe, the mother, forgetting herself entirely, took the little one into her arms to keep her from choking to death. Rasping and struggling for her life, the child said, "Momma, kiss me!" Without thinking of herself, the mother tenderly kissed her daughter. She got diphtheria and some days thereafter she went to be forever with the Lord. Real love forgets self. Real love knows no danger. Real love doesn't count the cost. Can anyone here question Princess Alice's love for her daughter? Can anyone here question Jesus' love for us?

Second, Jesus suffered on the cross to demonstrate his love. If you want to discover the depth of God's love for us then just look into his face as he suffered. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Completion of Sacrifice

Do you remember what happened earlier that week? Jesus went to the temple courts and discovered the money changers. Who are the money changers? They were business men who converted foreign currency to local currency. The required taxes and sacrifices had to be paid in local currency. The exchange rate was extremely high. We are still aware of the concept of taxes. The concept of sacrifices is foreign to us. You couldn't bring your sacrifice. You had to buy your sacrifice. It had to be temple approved. It had to be perfect. They sacrificed some animal for the sins they committed over the period of time from the last sacrifice. Why don't we sacrifice today? The reason is simple. The reason is Jesus. He was the perfect sacrifice.

Third and finally, Jesus suffered on the cross to be the complete sacrifice. He was the perfect sacrifice without sin. He died so we could live. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

The end had come. There is nothing pretty about Jesus hanging on the cross. There is no other way to say it. He suffered. He had to suffer. He had to suffer to **fulfill prophecy**. He had to suffer to **demonstrate his love**. He had to suffer to be the **complete sacrifice**. The centurion said it for us all, "Surely this man was the son of God!" Will you pray with me?