
At Golgotha

DAVE BAST

On the Friday we call “good,” the sun was blotted out at noon, darkness descended over everything as though creation itself did not want to see what was happening on Golgotha. Sometimes darkness seems to fill our lives, too, and we cannot see any light, any way forward. So how can you go on when it seems like there is nothing left to live for? Well, here is one thing that might help. Remember, it is Friday, but Sunday is coming. Stay tuned.

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And Scott, we are in the midst of a series on the last day of Jesus’ life, and today, obviously, we come to the central event of that day, the cross.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; Good Friday, what happened on Golgotha, we will be talking about that, as well as we will recap briefly here some of the events that led up to that climactic moment on the cross. We said in a previous program that all of the Gospels in a way lead up to the cross. They are sort of a story of the cross with long introductions; but most immediately, there was a series of events those last twenty-four to thirty-six hours that we could look at, too.

DAVE BAST

Right. It is a familiar story, but I do not know if all of us, even maybe if we have grown up in church, have put all the pieces together, and exactly why it unfolded the way it did. So, in the first program of this series we looked at the Upper Room scene and the last supper of Jesus and the disciples, and the institution of communion or the Lord’s Supper, and the foot-washing that happened there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is what we sometimes call Maundy Thursday. I don’t know about you or others, but I grew up, it was years before I ever asked anybody: What is Maundy...?

DAVE BAST

What is Maundy? It sounds like Maunday, but it is Maundy.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, Maundy... So I asked and nobody knew; but it turns out that that word, Maundy, is from the Latin word for *command*; in fact, our word *mandate* or *command* – *mand* – it is even in there – and it is when Jesus said, “A new command I give you.” He said this in the Upper Room. A new command I give you; love one another; which I think is so incredible that Jesus said that, because he was about to be abandoned by every last friend he had on earth, and yet he was telling them: I love you, and when this is all finished, you have to love each other as well. So, that is quite a remarkable thing to say minutes before you are going to be

betrayed and abandoned by everybody; but that love is still the key.

DAVE BAST

And he also said: Greater love has no one than this; that a person lay down his or her life for friends. And that is exactly what Jesus was going to do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly what was going to happen.

DAVE BAST

And then he went out to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he prayed that terrible, anguished prayer: Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. And it didn't as Judas came with a band to arrest him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and we looked at that in the previous program as well; and one of the things we noted there, too, just by way of review, is that what happened in that Garden of Gethsemane reversed another garden, the Garden of Eden. Sin came through humanity giving in to the temptation to not do it God's way – that is what happened in Eden – sin was reversed when Jesus resisted that same temptation and did do it God's way, and drank the cup that the Father was presenting to him; and that led him directly, of course, to what was next, which was the cross.

DAVE BAST

Although before the cross there were these trial scenes that are also described in the Gospel; and so, during the middle of the night they took him first to the High Priest's house, and it appears that there was a sort of emergency session of the Sanhedrin, or the Great Council of the Jewish elders, and Jesus was brought up before them on a charge of blasphemy.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and you know, some years ago there was a situation comedy show on TV called *Night Court*. It was kind of a funny show, and it is true, I guess, in big cities where they will sometimes hold court twenty-four hours a day and they will do traffic violations and minor infractions just to keep the system rolling; but generally speaking, trials that are held in the dead of night look suspicious. It looks like after all the reporters have gone home and most people have gone to sleep, now we are going to hold this trial, you would be really suspicious if somebody held a murder trial or something...

Scott Hoezee/

DAVE BAST

In the middle of the night.

DAVE BAST

Without any announcement.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It looks fishy, and it was, right? This looked like a put-up job – a kangaroo court sort of a thing; and it was done in a hurry.

DAVE BAST

But, now here is the interesting thing: They condemned Jesus to death, and they, of course, put the question to him directly eventually – I mean, they had false witnesses and they could not quite get their stories straight...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it was not going so well.

DAVE BAST

And finally the Chief Priest said to him: Are you the Christ? Are you the Son of God, like you alleged to have claimed? And Jesus said point-blank, in effect: Yes, I am.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sure, yes, I am; which was enough for them, but then they still had to get Rome to do the deed. I mean, the Romans did crucifixions, and so they had to also bring him before the governor – before Pilate.

DAVE BAST

See now, that is an interesting point that you raise, because I have always kind of wondered about that. If you think about the later history of the New Testament, there was a very similar scene played out with Stephen – one of the early Christian disciples and the first martyr – and they just took him out and stoned him to death. No Rome – no nothing. They just did it themselves. Have you ever puzzled over that? Why didn't they just murder Jesus? Why didn't they just drag him out? I have, incidentally, if you do not have a good answer.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, good, because I don't, so go ahead.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think it is because they didn't just want to get rid of Jesus, they wanted to crucify him. They wanted to discredit him. Because crucifixion not only was terribly shameful and painful and all the rest; but for a devout Jew it was a clear sign of the curse of God: Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree, says the Law.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And they could not do that piece themselves, so they did not just want to haul him out and throw him off a cliff.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; yes, exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They needed Pilate. The interesting thing about Pontius Pilate, though, is he smelled a rat. I mean, he knew this was not right. One of the Gospels says his wife had been having some bad dreams that something bad was...

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is Matthew.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That was going to come up, and so he is on edge, and he takes a look at this Jesus and says: I don't see anything so wrong here; but at one point, Matthew says even though Pilate was resisting and complaining that this looked like a put-up job, and it was, this looked like an innocent man, and he was; but eventually, Matthew says, Pilate saw he was getting nowhere, so he said: Fine, go. Just take him away; and that is where, you know, it brings us right straight to the cross, where we are going to be looking at it today.

DAVE BAST

Yes, there is this other little detail right at the end of his trial. Pilate calls for a basin of water...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, famous.

DAVE BAST

And in front of the crowd he washes his hands of the guilt of what is about to happen; and that has come over, actually, into English as a phrase: I wash my hands of it. I disassociate... I have nothing to do with this. It is not my fault; except it was his fault, because he caved – he was a coward. He was supposed to uphold justice and he condemned – knowingly condemned – an innocent man to a horrible death.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which then also... So, whatever the motivations of the Jews were to use Pilate, as we were just talking about, the fact that this was unjust – the fact that Jesus was sinless – was also brought out by the fact that even this greasy Roman politician recognized the truth; and indeed, so we know that Jesus died unjustly, but he died for us.

DAVE BAST

So, let's focus on exactly what did happen at the cross on Golgotha on that Good Friday afternoon, after a brief pause.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Today we are looking at Jesus' crucifixion. We are going to be particularly focusing on Matthew 27. It brings us straight up to the cross, which has got to be one of the most familiar symbols now in the entire world. It is in almost every Christian church, on church signs, we wear it as jewelry, as necklaces, we put it on our hymn books, we sing about it, we celebrate it. It is one of the most common symbols in the world, and it is maybe just a little too common. Maybe we have lost something by over familiarity.

DAVE BAST

It certainly would have struck the First Century Roman observers as odd that this was taken up as the symbol of a new religion, because the cross was hideous; it was repulsive; most people probably have heard that it was forbidden for a Roman citizen to be crucified – it was just too degrading. It would be as if we took up an electric chair as the symbol of a new faith, and put a little thing on a necklace and wore it around our necks on a chain.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, if you were on the subway or something in the city and you saw a young woman next to you with electric chair earrings, you would think this must be one of those messed up young people these days.

DAVE BAST

Yes, a Goth or something; yes, macabre.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Neal Plantinga once said that – and I was always struck by this because I, too, had gotten over-familiarized with the cross as I grew up – but when I was in seminary, Neal Plantinga one time said: We talk about how Jesus was glorified on the cross, but when you think about it, that is just as odd as talking about someone being enthroned on an electric chair. These are not places from which glory usually emerges, or

anything good. This is where death comes.

DAVE BAST

And usually the people who end up there are much deserving of the punishment – of the degradation – but in Jesus' case, as we were just talking before the break, he was completely innocent, even pronounced innocent by the very judge who condemned him to death; but let's listen to the familiar story again as Matthew tells it. Chapter 27:

³³They came to a place called Golgotha, which means the Place of the Skull. ³⁴There they offered Jesus wine to drink mixed with gall, but after tasting it he refused to drink it. ³⁵When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots; ³⁶and sitting down, they kept watch over him there. ³⁷Above his head they placed the written charge against him: This is Jesus, the king of the Jews. ³⁸Two criminals were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁹Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads ⁴⁰and saying, "You who were 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." ⁴¹In the same way, the chief priests, the teachers of the Law, and the elders mocked him; ⁴⁴and the criminals who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

So there is the scene.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and it is quite a scene. It is a terrible scene, and it was a scene from which those who were there surely averted their eyes – they looked away. It is the kind of thing that if you walked anywhere near such a thing with your children you would cover their eyes – you would hurry your kids past because it was terrible; but we call it *good*. All things being equal, it does not sound like a good story you just read, it sounds terrible. In fact, I was in church on Good Friday this past year, and before the service started a couple were there and they must have had their elderly mother, and halfway down the aisle she stopped and turned around and said to her daughter: Well, it wasn't a very good Friday for Jesus. And indeed it wasn't. To call this Friday *good* shows a lot about our theology – the way we think about where salvation came from and what Jesus had to do. I mean, November 22nd was the day John F. Kennedy was assassinated. We would be offended by anybody who would celebrate November 22nd every day, calling it a good day. We would say: No, one of our leaders was assassinated. How is that a good day? And yet, without batting an eye, we do say: Good Friday; even though we know full well what happened.

DAVE BAST

Well, because Jesus was much more than a martyr or a victim.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

But I just think it would be good for us to try to imagine our way back into that scene, because we have domesticated this whole day with our religious observances and all that, and even our hymns: Beneath the cross of Jesus I fain would take my stand. I don't think so. I don't think anyone would have wanted to be standing beneath the cross of Jesus. Just imagine how it must have affected Mary, his mother, who was there...

SCOTT HOEZEE

What a horrible thing.

DAVE BAST

And Mary Magdalene, who was faithful, because they are not only watching Jesus suffer this agony, but people are laughing at him while he is doing it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, mocking him.

DAVE BAST

They are mocking him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It's a sideshow – a circus.

DAVE BAST

Hey, Son of God – Son of God; come on down; then we will believe in you; ha, ha, ha; very funny.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it is just bad in every sense and a bad place to be, even. Indeed, we sing it easy... We talk about Calvary, but that is the Latinized version of Golgotha, which means A Place of the Skull, and Calvary – from calvarium – which means *skull*; so really, every time we sing about Calvary, Calvary, Calvary, we are saying skull, skull, skull.

DAVE BAST

Skull, skull, skull – death, death, death, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, it is Skull Hill, as Eugene Peterson put it. Dead man's gulch. The deathly hallows. The bone yard. It is a terrible place.

DAVE BAST

The other thing we tend to pass over, and again, Christian art has done this; they tastefully... of course, this has probably, I suppose, been the most depicted scene in human history as far as art is concerned...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Probably, yes; probably.

DAVE BAST

But Jesus is always portrayed tastefully draped in cloth covering... but he was crucified naked. That is clearly the way the Romans did it, and Matthew even says, as the other Gospels do, that the soldiers gambled for his clothes. So, imagine this rough Roman squad of legionnaires, and there is a centurion in command, and their prerogative is to take the personal possessions of the condemned, which in Jesus' case did not amount to much; but they divvy up his clothes, and then there is this last garment, which would have been worn next to the skin – a kind of a long nightshirt type thing – and they decide to gamble for that: Let's toss for it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because the Romans knew that it was not enough just to kill somebody; you had to humiliate him, too. You had to humiliate the person; and all through history, starting – we talked about the Garden of Eden in the previous program – starting then, being stripped, being made naked, has always been a key way to humiliate... in fact, many of us have heard the story from World War II and from the Nazi concentration camp, where the Nazis took a rabbi, stripped him of his clothes, ordered him to stand on a table and then preach the sermon he would have preached in the synagogue the next Sabbath. What great sport, right? To watch a minister preach a sermon naked; but that is evil. I mean, what happens to Jesus here is all of sin, all of evil coming to a focus. Evil always corrupts, it always humiliates, it always strips us bare. That is what Jesus had to fix, and so there is something that makes sense, that the things he had to fix he also had to bear.

DAVE BAST

Yes, including our shame – the shame that follows guilt, as Adam and Eve felt it and knew that they were naked, it says in Genesis. I think the later New Testament writers, especially Paul, really took that idea up and ran with it with the thought of: We are clothed with Christ’s righteousness now because of what he went through on the cross, because of his willingness to bear it all – Jesus paid it all – another one of the hymns we sing. Therefore, we can be dressed. We never need to be ashamed. We are never guilty again when his righteousness covers us like a garment.

SCOTT HOEZEE

What he suffered we will not now have to suffer because he took our place, and that includes the experience of hell; and Jesus refers to that in some of the things he said from the cross, and we will get to some of those words from the cross after the break.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Hi. Welcome back to *Groundwork*. Along with Scott Hoezee, I am Dave Bast, and we are talking about the central story of the Christian faith; the story of the cross, reading from Matthew 27, and I will continue it from verse 45:

From noon until three in the afternoon, darkness came over all the land. ⁴⁶About three in the afternoon, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” which means, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” ⁴⁷When some of those standing there heard this, they said, “He is 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. ⁴⁹The rest said, “Leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes.” ⁵⁰And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, it is interesting... as commentator, Dale Bruner notes: Isn’t it interesting that Jesus died in the interrogative mood. He died with a question on his lips – not a triumphant statement – in Matthew anyway, but a question: Why? God – he wasn’t calling for Elijah. These people did not know their Hebrew and Aramaic at all. He was calling to God, not Elijah.

DAVE BAST

Yes, Eli... Eloi...

SCOTT HOEZEE

My God, my God... why... and of course, that is the first line from Psalm 22, which is a psalm of lament, and some people think that Jesus was quoting that and he was invoking the whole psalm, but again as Dale Bruner says: No, I don’t think a cross is a time to do memory work.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I like that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He meant this. The Father and the Spirit withdrew from him, which is by definition to have no access to God; that is hell.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think there have been continual attempts to soften this cry. It is unthinkable. How can God forsake God? How can the Father cut off the Son? And so, some people have suggested: Well, Jesus was not really forsaken or abandoned by God, he just felt that way. He really felt down, you know, Scott; the way you and I feel down.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, I don't think that works here.

DAVE BAST

Which is no doubt true, right; or you mentioned he is quoting Psalm 22; well, Psalm 22 ends with praise and worship, and that is true; but why didn't he quote the end of the psalm if that is what he meant? Why did he quote this? I don't think we can explain this one away.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No. Something outrageous happened – something amazing. I mean, in our doctrine of the Trinity, Dave, with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we believe that long before there was a creation, from all eternity, these three have been one God. They have been so tightly together that you could never separate one from the other two. To try to do so would be sort of like taking a tablespoon of red food coloring, pouring it in a glass of water, mixing it, and then saying to somebody: Now, get all the red food coloring back out of that glass. Get a clear glass of water and a whole tablespoon... You could not do it. Once they are together, they are together; and that is what we say about the Trinity. You cannot have Father without Son and Spirit, or Spirit without Son, except here. Something happened here that had never happened before and will never happen again; but there was a breach in that Triune fellowship, and for Jesus, it was an experience of hell.

DAVE BAST

We could also, I think, talk about his human nature. Admittedly, we are in deep mystery here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, indeed.

DAVE BAST

But even as a man, I do not think Jesus ever had a moment when he was not conscious of his Father's presence and favor. "This is my Son; my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." That is what the voice said when he was baptized, and said it again on the Mount of Transfiguration; so, Jesus as a man lived in perfect harmony and fellowship with God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and C. S. Lewis played with this a little bit and had some thought experiments with this, and one of the interesting things Lewis said is that even the most hardcore atheist in the world today does not really know what it feels like to have no access to God. They are in God's grip whether they know it or not. So what Jesus experienced no one has ever experienced, to be cut off from God. That is hell. No access to God, and it happened here, and he did that for us.

DAVE BAST

And he knew he had to do it somehow. He knew this was coming. I think this is the cup that we talked about in the garden. This is why he shrank so from death; why he did not face it with a sort of bold insouciance, you know, the way...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Triumphal...

DAVE BAST

Yes. Words begin to fail us, but I think about our old communion liturgy in our Reformed tradition that says: He endured separation from God, even the bitter and shameful death of the cross when he cried out with a loud voice: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? So that we might be accepted by God and never be forsaken by him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Never be forsaken again; and he did it all... In the history of the Church there have been lots of different images used for the atonement – what Jesus did – and the Church has never really picked only one because what he did affects so much. It was a defeat of the devil; it was a defeat of death; it was a payment of the penalty; it was the fulfilling of the wrath of God; all the different images we have used are true; but above all, it was, indeed, his dealing with our death; and somebody had to deal with it because you cannot escape it, which reminds me of a story. It was a Sunday; my wife and I, in 2002 – March 2002, my wife and I were in New York City, and on a Sunday morning we went to Ground Zero to see – they were still cleaning up. There were only six months since 9/11. The twin-tower wreckage was still there; and while we were there that morning they actually found the remains of a firefighter, and we saw them take the flag-draped coffin to an ambulance and there was an honor guard, and everybody there was weeping; we were weeping; everybody was moved to tears. That same night, though, we came to a concert, the last piece of which from the Vienna Philharmonic was Mozart's Ave Verum Corpus – Hail, O Blessed Body, in which Mozart says: Through that body, wracked and torn on the cross, we have been made whole. So, on the same day we had the beginning of death and the ending with how Jesus took care of it, and that was powerful for us. Jesus' cross paid it all.

DAVE BAST

And I guess that is why we call this Friday *good*...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

Because no matter where we find ourselves, in the midst of death and darkness and even despair: Hey, it is Friday... but Sunday is coming. There is a last piece to this story when Jesus rises again.

SCOTT HOEZEE

God won the victory.

DAVE BAST

And hallelujah for that!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Indeed.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation and don't forget, it is listeners like you giving us feedback that will keep our topics relevant. So please tell us what you think about what you are hearing, suggest topics or passages you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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