
Good Friday: The Crucifixion of Jesus Christ

SCOTT HOEZEE

The German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, once said how easy it is for us to forget what Jesus' death was really like. After all, Jesus was not crucified between two candles on a nice church altar. He was crucified between two thugs at a place so terrifying it was named after a skull. Indeed, the cross of Jesus has become such a common symbol worldwide these last two thousand years that sometimes we miss appreciating how raw and ugly a cross is. Today on *Groundwork*, we will be in a Good Friday mode to ponder Jesus' death. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

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; and Dave, for Good Friday and Easter, on this program and the next, we are going to go to the end of Matthew's Gospel. All the Gospels, of course, narrate Jesus' death and resurrection, but for this set of programs, we are just going to go to Matthew 27, on this program, and then Matthew 28 on the next one; because, of course, Dave, the crucifixion and that entire event of the Passion during that last week of Jesus' life, that is what, really, the Gospels have been leading up to all along. In fact, somebody once said that the Gospels are really Passion narratives with long introductions, because this is really what the story is all about.

DAVE BAST

Interestingly, a lot of times people who are maybe casually acquainted with Jesus are interested in his teaching or his example...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

But the Evangelists, they zero right in on the cross and its meaning and its significance. Of course, the cross has become the best known symbol for the Christian faith, which is really, if you stop and think about it, a little bit odd.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Despite that, though, Dave, I think we do have a tendency...even in our churches and how we structure worship services...we sometimes have a tendency to rush past Good Friday. We are really eager to get to Easter. We sometimes turn Palm Sunday into a really happy, happy day, even though for Jesus it wasn't, according to the Gospels; and then, Easter, of course, is happy and high, bright, light and clear; and then we have got this one dark spot; but, we don't...

DAVE BAST

Which is generally more lightly attended, those Thursday or Friday services.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, I have attended some Good Friday services that end up being kind of pre-Easter services. We shy away from focusing on what happened on that cross. We don't want to do that, because it is going to have great meaning, and it does have great meaning, for each one of us. So, that is what we want to do on this program. We could start by noting, Dave, that even though we have all probably heard, in sermons maybe or in other writings, a lot of physical descriptions of what happens to the human body on a cross. The Gospel writers are not that interested in the physical torment. They hardly talk about it at all.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you know, we do tend to do that. In fact, there was a famous movie produced by Mel Gibson on the crucifixion, which showed in excruciating detail the things that happened to Jesus, and they must have been horrible, certainly. Everyone in the 1st Century would have known what that was like, but the Gospel writers...you know, they will say something like they got to the hill of the skull and there they crucified him, and leave it at that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; the spiritual and the theological meaning of the cross is what the Gospel writers, and also we, are interested in. So, let's get right to it. Let's go to Matthew 27, and we are going to pick up the reading at verse 32.

DAVE BAST

As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross.³³ They came to a place called Golgotha, which means the Place of the Skull.³⁴ There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it.³⁵ When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots...³⁶ And sitting down, they kept watch over him there.³⁷ Above his head, they placed the written charge against him: This is Jesus, the king of the Jews.

SCOTT HOEZEE

³⁸Two rebels were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left.³⁹ Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads⁴⁰ and saying, "You 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."⁴¹ In the same way, the chief priests, the teachers of the Law, the elders mocked him.⁴² "He saved others," they said, "but he cannot save himself. He is the king of Israel. Let him come down from the cross, and then we will believe in him."⁴³ He trusts in God, let God rescue him now, if he wants that for him. For he said, "I am the Son of God."⁴⁴ In the same way, the rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

DAVE BAST

So, there is the heart of the story, and it takes place at this hilltop that was known as Golgotha; and in the older translations, especially in the King James Bible, that word was *Calvary*, which is the Latin form of the name; and in fact, a lot of our old hymns and songs tend to sing about Calvary...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Sometimes even in kind of a rollicky gospel tune.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; but *calvarium*, the Latin word *calvarium*, from which we get Calvary, means *skull*...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

A dead head; something that most of us would find kind of creepy or horrifying; and yet, we sing about skull hill sometimes in an upbeat way; and of course, we are thankful for what Jesus did there, but the fact that the place...and there is some evidence that the rocky outcropping of this hill looked like a skull, and so that is where the Romans decided to crucify people, just outside the city. So, it is a terrible place; it is named after a dead head; or as Eugene Peterson paraphrased it, it is Skull Hill...and that is where they take him; and for the Romans, Dave, these crucifixions were public...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And for the Romans, these were almost like, you know, sometimes you are driving on the highway and you see a big billboard...a big sign on the side of the road, and it will show a terrible car crash, and then it will say on the billboard: Don't let this happen to you. Don't drink and drive...

DAVE BAST

Or: Don't text and drive.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right; that too. Well, that is what public crucifixions were like. They were like: Behave; obey Caesar; pay your taxes; or you will end up like this.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; absolutely; they were sending a message, and that is why they were, in the case of Golgotha, it is just outside the city; it is on the main road. In fact, Roman historians tell us...you maybe remember the story of Spartacus and the slave revolt that happened about one hundred years before Jesus' crucifixion...when they finally put that down...when the Roman general took the last six thousand prisoners and lined them up and crucified every one of them on the road leading into Rome, every hundred feet or so, another cross. So, these incredibly gruesome, awful spectacles were used for political purposes by the Romans to send that message.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And they were public spectacles. A lot of us, I am sure, today, Dave, have a hard time imagining this, but you know, all through history, even up until the late 19th, early 20th Centuries, hangings in the Old West...families would come out for these things; men and women would come to watch people die; they would come to jeer, to mock, to cheer, even; and that is what we see also at the cross. It is a public event. People come out; they are watching these three men die, one of whom is Jesus, in the middle of the three; and you know, you kick a guy when he is down, and you sort of tailor-make your insults. So, if you see a rich man who gets in trouble, you say: Aha, buddy; your money can't help you now...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or you see somebody who is famous, or really strong, and they have a downfall, and you say: Well, you're not such hot stuff now, are you? So also for Jesus. When you say you can heal people, and you say you are the Son of God, that is where the insults are going to get aimed.

DAVE BAST

You know, this scene, as we kind of watch it through Matthew's eyes, brings out all the worst in human nature, doesn't it, in the human race? We see injustice here, because Jesus was completely innocent. Why do

they condemn him to death? They said he was a blasphemer, when he was witnessing to himself the truth about who he was. We see sort of cowardice. Pilate, you know, condemns him...signs his death warrant because he is afraid of the consequences if he lets Jesus off, even though he knows he is innocent.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, this great representative of Roman justice does an injustice; and then the crowd with their mockery...their taunts...they are laughing at him...

SCOTT HOEZEE

They are cruel, yes.

DAVE BAST

No sympathy, yes; these are all the reasons Jesus actually had to go to the cross.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; that is why he couldn't jump down from the cross. These passersby and the religious leaders who are mocking him, who are arrogant and cowardly at the same time, who are cruel and belittling, they become a microcosm, sort of a condensed version of why Jesus had to die; because this is sinful humanity at its worst, and that is why he had to stay on that cross, and in fact, not come back down, as he was being taunted to do.

DAVE BAST

Well, so far Matthew has just shown us sort of the preamble...the way it started and what happened, but he has much more to tell us, including one of the most profound sentences in all the Bible, and that is where we will turn next.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening 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. So, let's go right back to Matthew 27, and continue the story of Jesus' crucifixion on Good Friday: ⁴⁵From noon until 3:00 in the afternoon, darkness came over all the land. ⁴⁶About 3:00 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." ⁴⁸Immediately 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, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him."

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁵⁰When Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit; ⁵¹and at that moment, the curtain of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom; the earth shook, the rocks split, ⁵²and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. ⁵³They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people. ⁵⁴When 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!" ⁵⁵And many women were there watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. ⁵⁶Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons.

DAVE BAST

Well, there is a lot to talk about there, isn't there? But maybe we could start off by pointing out the crowd's misunderstanding. Either they didn't hear Jesus very clearly or they didn't know their Hebrew very well, or Aramaic, because they thought that he was calling out, on the cross, for Elijah...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, Eli, Eli; but of course, he wasn't. He was asking, you know, addressing to God: Why had you abandoned me? Which has raised questions, and some no small level of biblical interpretation controversy in these centuries and millennia since then. Jesus, we say, is a full member of the Trinity. He was always fully God, he was the Son of God; so, the question is: How can God abandon God, right? That would be like my saying: Oh, Scott, oh, Scott; why have you abandoned Scott? It is sort of like: Well, Scott; you are still Scott; you cannot abandon Scott. So, can God abandon God if Jesus is God? What are we to make of this cry?

DAVE BAST

Yes, so there have been attempts by scholars and preachers to explain it in different ways. Some have said: Well, it wasn't true; Jesus wasn't really abandoned by God; he just felt that way because he was very lonely; or some have even pointed out this is the first verse of Psalm 22, and the last part of that psalm ends on a note of faith, and kind of comfort; so maybe Jesus was just quoting the psalm to himself, and they misunderstood because of verse 1.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Although I have always liked Frederick Dale Bruner's rejoinder to that idea. He said: You know, when you are on a cross, it is not a time to do memory work...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; and also, you know, do we think we know Jesus better than he knew what was going on? So, no; he was actually abandoned by God in some unfathomable way.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And a lot of people have turned to the doctrine of the Trinity to kind of parse this and figure it out. Maybe the idea is that for the first time in all eternity, there is a sense in which the Father and the Spirit kind of withdrew from Jesus. There was a temporary break in their triune fellowship; and maybe...and John Calvin thinks this...that maybe that is the moment when we refer to in the Creed as his descent into hell; because what is hell? Well, it is not finally a place of flames and torment, it is the place from which you have no access to God; and even the most hardcore atheist in the world today does not really know what that is like, because an atheist at any moment could turn to God and God would be there for him. So, maybe Jesus had no access, briefly, and so that was his going to hell for us. Now, to be honest, there are some theologians who think that is a horrifying idea, that the Father turned his back...there is even a popular song: The Father turned his back*, and there are some theologians who are deeply offended by that; so, but that is a possibility, that there was a Trinitarian breach, and that was Jesus taking hell for us.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; whatever was the reality, we can be sure it was worse than anything we can imagine or say in our attempts to explain it; and we can also say that it was for us. I love a phrase from our communion liturgy at the Lord's Supper, where we recall the fact in the Lord's Supper that Jesus was forsaken by God so that we never will be forsaken by God. He did it for us; he tasted the punishment that our sin called for, and he paid it in full.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; but, no sooner does Jesus die, and a couple of very interesting things happen.

DAVE BAST

Very interesting; you are right, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

One of which is only recorded in Matthew. The first one is recorded elsewhere, too; that curtain that separated the Holy of Holies in the Temple from all the rest of the Temple was torn from the top, which is Matthew's way of saying: Someone in heaven reached down and tore that, so that now the way is open to have a reunion with God.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; and what a beautiful idea that is, that Holy of Holies, where God...his very presence was focused. Only the high priest could go in; only once a year; only with blood; and now the writer to the Hebrews will make a big deal out of this. Jesus has done the reality, of which that was only the symbol. He has brought his blood into the very presence of God; and so, the curtain is removed. We have easy access now through Christ to the Father.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then we are told there was a terrible earthquake, as though the creation itself convulsed when the creator—the Word of God who spoke creation into being...

DAVE BAST

Just like the sun was darkened...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, right; creation is responding here. So, rocks were split, but also, some tombs open, and then later, we are told, the people inside those tombs...some of them...holy people, Matthew says, rose again and walked back into the city, scaring the [hin-hooey] out of a lot of people, I would think. It is like: What?! How many? What did their bodies look like? Are they still decayed or were they restored to some earlier... How long did they live? Really good questions, but Matthew doesn't have any interest in answering them.

DAVE BAST

Now, that is a part of the Easter story, or the Good Friday story, kind of previewing the Easter story, that I will bet you have never had a sermon on, or heard a sermon on. I know I haven't...

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, I don't think so.

DAVE BAST

I don't know what to make of that. I believe that is just weird; and as you said, Scott, only Matthew records this, and then he doesn't say anything more.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

I mean, what happened to these people? Did they die again right away? Did they go back to their old lives?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; Matthew doesn't tell us, but...

DAVE BAST

It is a strange, strange detail.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It's a little less strange when we remember that Matthew was writing for a Jewish reading audience. So, all through Matthew...Matthew was saturated with Old Testament quotes, but also allusions or passing references to Old Testament stories and verses that Matthew never felt the need to explain. He assumes his Jewish reading audience would just get it; and so here. He knew the Jews were expecting a resurrection at the last day, and so what they would see here is that Jesus has made the future now. There is this sense in which resurrection life is now available to us today; we don't have to wait for the role to be called up yonder; the future is now; and if he was writing for a Jewish reading audience, they would perceive that this is a big part of the good news. The future has come, the resurrection has come in Jesus; and of course, that has great meaning for all of us; and as we conclude the program, Dave, we will want to think about that.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are focused on Matthew's account of Good Friday: Jesus' death on the cross, his satisfaction for the sins of the world as he sacrifices himself; and just to back up, I kind of used the name of this day...it sort of is automatic because that is what we call it...we call it Good Friday, but that in itself is a little bit odd, isn't it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Christians are about the only group in history, or religion in history that celebrates the death of its founder. You know, we might remember the day our dad died or the day a beloved child died. We remember November 22, 1963, when John F. Kennedy died, but we don't call those good days...those are not happy anniversaries to observe, except for the death of Jesus. We do call it *good* because it was good for us. That is the point that we want to remember, that this is not finally a story from long ago...far away. Jesus' death was not an ordinary death. He died tragically, but it wasn't even an ordinary tragedy. It was a sacrificial death for us; and that is why, also, Dave, it had to happen on a cross; and sometimes we don't think about this, although Fleming Rutledge, in her recent, amazing new book, *The Crucifixion*, points this out, that we wouldn't be saved by Jesus' death if he had been run over by a chariot. We wouldn't be saved if he had had a heart attack. We wouldn't have been saved if the Romans had lopped his head off with a sword. It had to be a cross, and that is an interesting thing to think about.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I said at the very beginning of this program that the cross is an odd symbol for a faith...for people to pick up on; and the reason is, it was such a gruesome thing—it was such an off-putting thing in the ancient world. It was actually the kind of thing that people would shrink from. They wouldn't choose to make jewelry out of it, you know, or to put it on top of their church buildings because of the connotations that it had of cruelty, of shame, of public humiliation...all the stuff we were talking about earlier...that billboard effect of a crucifixion for the Romans; but, the fact that we have adopted it, that we find in the cross the very heart of the meaning of Jesus' death for our salvation, that too has its roots in the New Testament; specifically in Paul's letter to the Galatians.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and that also has...you know, that Old Testament background, you know. Fleming Rutledge refers to the godlessness of the cross, because cursed is anyone who hangs from a tree, the Old Testament says; so, there is...

DAVE BAST

Which Paul quotes in Galatians 3.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, in Galatians; and he is harking back to that tradition. There is an accursedness—a godlessness—to the cross, and that is the point; and of course, that is the point for each one of us, right Dave? I mean, we sing in

the song, you know, who was the guilty? Who brought this upon you? I...I crucified you; and sometimes we...I think ordinary people think: Well, okay, but you know, I am not Hitler; I am not Pol Pot or Attila the Hun; I am just sort of, you know, a garden variety sinner, really, was my sin that bad, that Jesus had to go to this godless cross? And the answer is, yes, because we are all...God sees humanity as a corporate entity. We are all links in a long chain of sin; somebody had to snap that chain eventually.

DAVE BAST

Right; and so, the curse of the cross falls upon Jesus, and that is exactly why he had to die this way, in order to proclaim this truth, that he is taking our curse—the curse of all sinful humanity—on his own shoulders, on his own head, and he is exhausting it by dying for it on the cross; and that, incidentally, explains another little thing in the New Testament that maybe you have noticed before, or you found puzzling. Paul says somewhere in one of his letters that no one can say Jesus is cursed by the power of the Holy Spirit, because that must have been a common reaction. When Paul proclaimed the message of the cross, pious Jews would shrink in horror and say: Well then, Jesus was cursed because he died on a tree. That is what the Bible says. And Paul says: Well, yes, but not the way you think. He was cursed for *your* sin, not for his own.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is what Good Friday means for each one of us; but of course, the story doesn't stop there, Dave; and so, there is one last little detail to pick up from the end of Matthew 27, and it goes like this:

⁶²The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate, ⁶³and said, "Sir, we remember that while he was still alive, that deceiver (Jesus) said, 'After three days I will rise again,' so, give order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise, his disciples might steal the body. (Then Pilate says, and Frederick Buechner pointed this out once) Pilate says, "Take a guard; go, make the tomb as secure as you know how."

You almost wonder if Pilate is being ironic there. It is like: Go make it as secure as you can; but compared to the power of God, how secure is that?

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; the Romans put their seal on it, and they post a guard outside it, and all to no avail, because Jesus is not going to stay in the tomb; and really, that is why, when we get to the end of Good Friday, yes, it is good not to rush past this...it is good to see the cursedness of Jesus' death—the darkness—even the forsakenness, the abandonment that he experienced, all for us, but we don't stop there. No seal is going to keep that stone in place.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, there is a sense in which, Dave...metaphorically or theologically or spiritually...there is a sense in which all through history people have been trying to keep Jesus in that tomb; and we are going to talk about that on the next program on the resurrection; but all through history, people have tried to explain this away or deny...in other words, we keep trying to make that tomb just as secure as we can; but here is the truth, Dave, and you just said it a minute ago. If God was involved in the cursedness of the cross, if Jesus really did bear that curse for us, if God was active on that cross, then God is active inside that tomb, and nothing, but nothing will ever keep Jesus in there.

DAVE BAST

Thanks be to God. Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee. We hope you will join us again next time, as we keep our eyes on Jesus' tomb and listen to God's greatest miracle as it is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew.

Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to share what *Groundwork* means to you, or tell us what you would like to hear us talk about on *Groundwork*.

* This is a paraphrase of the line, "The Father turns his face away" from the song "How Deep the Father's Love for Us."

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