

**Turn Your Eyes
The Cross
Luke 23:26-56
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March 24, 2024**

Have you ever thought about how odd it is that followers of Jesus look to the cross as the primary symbol of our faith? Like many churches, the cross has a prominent place at McBIC above our stage. When I took a quick scan of my office, I identified a total of 14 crosses on my desk, on a poster collage, and hanging on my wall, including a cluster of nine crosses known as “The Crosses of Lent,” which my friend Glenn Martin gave me prior to his passing four years ago. These crosses sit to the left of my computer, so I see them multiple times every day.

Some people have likened adopting the cross as the emblem of the Christian faith as comparable in our day to prominently displaying the electric chair. But it’s not a fascination with what’s morbid that causes us to memorialize the cross. It’s an awareness of the cross’s significance that leads us to view this cruel instrument of death as the core of our faith.

Our Lenten sermon theme is “Turn Your Eyes,” and over the course of these six Sundays prior to Easter, we’re focusing our attention on Jesus, whom the author of Hebrews rightly identifies as “the author and perfecter of our faith.” Today on Palm Sunday, one week prior to Jesus’ glorious resurrection, I encourage us to focus our gaze on the cross where Jesus our Savior gave his life for us.

During his time with the disciples, Jesus repeatedly told them He was going to be killed. Each of the four gospels note that Jesus’ death shouldn’t have come as a surprise to the disciples because of the clear references Jesus made to his coming death. Listen to these statements from each of the four gospels.

- “From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed.” – Matthew 16:21

- “The Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him.” – Mark 10:33–34
- “Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be delivered not the hands of men.” – Luke 9:44
- “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.” – John 12:32–33

God’s plan, from before Jesus’ birth, was for Jesus to die at the hands of the Jewish leaders and the Roman government. In that last quote I read from John, Jesus alludes to the cross when He says He will be “lifted up from the earth.” In John 3:14–15, Jesus was even more explicit about the manner of his death when He said, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life.”

I know it’s the weekend and it’s been a tiring week, but if you’re really on the ball this morning, you might have noticed that this statement of Jesus in John 3:14–15 comes immediately before one of the best-known verses in the New Testament: John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” The proximity of the obscure reference to Moses lifting up a snake in the wilderness and John 3:16 alerts us to the importance of what took place in this event as the Israelites travelled to the Promised Land.

Understanding what took place when Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness can give us a greater appreciation for the significance of Jesus’ death on the cross. The story Jesus referred to is found in the Old Testament in the book of Numbers, chapter 21. The Israelites’ grumbling, complaining, and disobedience on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land is well documented, but in this case, their obstinance reached a climax. They spoke against God and against Moses and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this

miserable food!” I’ll read about God’s response to his peoples’ complaints in Numbers 21:6–9:

⁶Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. ⁷The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.

⁸The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” ⁹So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

God punished the Israelites for their sin by sending venomous snakes among them, which bit them and killed many, but Moses, as he often did, prayed for God’s mercy for the people, and God provided a remedy for their sin. Moses put a bronze snake on a pole and instructed the people that if they looked up at the bronze snake after they were bitten, they would be saved. The people who followed Moses’ instructions were saved from the poisonous snake bites and lived.

At the outset of his ministry, as Jesus was explaining who He was and what He was all about, He pointed back to this memorable event in Israel’s history and drew an analogy to how his own impending death would lead to salvation and life for everyone who believed in Him. “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life” (John 3:14–15).

Against that backdrop, let’s turn our focus to Jesus on the cross and take note of the significant events that took place there as Jesus died. I’ll begin reading at Luke 23:26–27 and then jump ahead to verse 32.

²⁶As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him.

³²Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed.
³³When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

³⁵The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.”

³⁶The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar
³⁷and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”

³⁸There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

³⁹One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

⁴⁰But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

⁴²Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

⁴³Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

⁴⁴It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last.

⁴⁷The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous man.” ⁴⁸When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. ⁴⁹But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

So much took place as Jesus hung on the cross, awaiting death, that entire sermon series have been preached on Jesus’ last words as the life drained from his body. I’d like us

to focus on four events that took place while Jesus hung on the cross—events that accentuate what his death means for us. Whether you’ve committed yourself to following Jesus or you don’t identify as a Christian, I encourage all of us to consider the implications Jesus’ words and actions on the cross have for us.

First, in the throes of his deep physical and emotional agony, Jesus embraced love and extended forgiveness to the people around Him, even those who were responsible for his death. As Jesus hung there dying, He prayed, “Father, forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing.” Jesus’ purpose in coming to earth was to demonstrate his Heavenly Father’s heart of love for all people by extending his love and forgiveness, and Jesus stayed true to that mission until his death. As we turn our eyes to Jesus on the cross this morning, I invite you to consider this question: Is there a person or a situation where God is asking me to extend love and forgiveness in the midst of my personal pain and agony rather than lashing out in anger or embracing bitterness and unforgiveness?

Secondly, as we turn our eyes to look at Jesus on the cross, we see that while He had the power to save Himself, Jesus chose instead to submit Himself to God’s plan. In Gethsemane as He agonized in prayer, Jesus prayed to his Father, “Not my will, but your will be done.” When the mob captured Him and He was arrested, Jesus told his disciples to put their swords away. He told them their swords were unnecessary because He could call thousands of angels to deliver Him if He wanted to. Finally, on the cross as the crowd jeered and one of the thieves next to Him challenged Him to save Himself and them, Jesus resisted and entrusted Himself to God’s care. Jesus’ willingness to endure all He went through gave us the opportunity to be saved through his death. In 1 Peter 2, the Apostle Peter wrote these words about Jesus on the cross:

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. “He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.” – 1 Peter 2:23–24

As we reflect on Jesus' example of submitting Himself to his Father's will on the cross, I'd like you to reflect on this question: Is there a difficult situation you currently find yourself in where Jesus is directing you to submit yourself and your situation to Him rather than taking matters into your own hands?

Third, in verse 45 we read this simple statement: "And the curtain of the temple was torn in two." Just before Jesus breathed his last breath, this massive curtain—which measured 60 feet long, 30 feet high, four inches thick, and weighed several tons—split in two from top to bottom. It reportedly took 30 men to move the curtain, which separated the Holy of Holies where God symbolically dwelled from the rest of the temple. No person except the high priest, and he only once a year, could enter the Holy of Holies. The curtain was a tangible reminder of the chasm separating humans in our sinfulness from God and his holiness. As Jesus died, the curtain tore down the middle communicating that through Jesus' death, the way to God was now open.

Many of us live as if that curtain still exists. God feels distant from us, even absent. However, the way to God is open for all of us. In fact, for those who have invited Jesus into our lives, his Spirit now lives inside us. The New Testament explains that after Jesus' death, our bodies are now his temple and God's Spirit lives in us—directing us, guiding us, providing us with counsel, and leading us into truth. In Hebrews 4:14-16, we read these words:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16)

Now that the temple curtain has been torn in two and we have access to God through Jesus, we can approach Him with the confidence that He loves us and is working

on our behalf. Accordingly, a question I'd like each of us to consider this morning is, "What do you need to bring before Jesus with confidence and boldness this morning?" Is there anything in your life you're struggling with that would be helpful for you to bring before Jesus so you can receive his mercy and his grace to help you in your need?

Jesus' final words and actions on the cross have profound meaning for all of us. Those of us who follow Jesus do well to reflect on his last hours and consider all that took place, and for those of us who don't know Jesus, what He did on the cross means the difference between spiritual death and life for us.

Jesus' last act on the cross that I want us to look at this morning was his extending salvation to the thief on the cross who placed his faith in Jesus. While one of the prisoners mocked Him, the other said, "Don't you fear God? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus responded, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

I love this exchange, because it confirms the truth that it's never too late for any of us to turn to Jesus in faith and receive his salvation. Prior to accepting Jesus, many of us hold on to the mistaken view that we have to somehow earn our salvation, that we can't simply turn to Jesus with a bedside confession or a "Hail Mary" we throw up in desperation, but that's not the truth of the gospel.

Several weeks ago, Pastor Susan had an opportunity to lead a man who was dying to place his faith in Jesus. While his family members walked with Jesus, this man had been resistant to faith and seemed to believe he was beyond God's help. As Susan met with this man, she shared the Scripture of the thief on the cross who placed his faith in Jesus. The forgiveness the criminal on a cross next to Jesus received moments before he passed into eternity demonstrates that it's never too late for any of us to place our faith in Jesus. If there is anyone here this morning who has not taken the step of inviting Jesus into your life, I urge you to consider that this morning. Are you willing, like the thief on the cross, to place your faith in Jesus, and receive his forgiveness and salvation?

It's fitting for us to cherish the cross because Jesus' death on the cross was the culmination of his life, the definitive statement that by placing our faith in Jesus, we can be forgiven of our sins and be reconciled to relationship with God. Jesus' death allows us to be declared righteous before God. Jesus' death and his subsequent resurrection means that we no longer have to be enslaved by sin and destined to die apart from God. We can live free from the power of sin, and we can embrace eternal life with Jesus.

I want each of you to know this morning that Jesus is here. He's no longer on the cross. God raised Him to life. But just as Jesus promised to draw all people to Himself when He was lifted up, and just as He forgave the sins of the thief on the cross, He extends his arms to each of us today and says, "Come. Come receive my love and forgiveness. Come receive eternal life." At first glance, our plight might not seem as desperate as the Israelites who had been bitten by the poisonous serpents and were doomed to die in Numbers 21, but each of us apart from Jesus are estranged from God and dying. We're doomed to a life of sin that will result in physical and spiritual death.

Listen to these words of Jesus from Matthew's gospel: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30). Each of us is in need of the peace and rest only Jesus can provide. I urge each of us today on this Sunday before Easter to accept Jesus' life, which He made available to us through his death on the cross when He took our sin upon Himself. The dying thief received salvation from Jesus by placing his faith in Him moments before he died, and that salvation is also available to each of us. As Jesus said in John 10:10, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." My heart for each of us is that we would experience Jesus' full life today.