**A Symbol of Death, Promise of Life**

A Mt. Zion Devotional Series

**Introduction**

 Easter has arrived. This year, our lives have been turned upside down, but perhaps it is because God is trying to get us to a place where we are again right side up in His eyes. Throughout Scripture, the Lord did things His way and said that His ways are not always our ways. Easter shows us how God can take a symbol of death, the cross, and through it offer new life.

 We are here. Life stands at a place where we have had much of the distractions wiped away, but what will come from it? Will we continue to squander the time we have been given or will we take the time to connect with the Lord? For this month, though we cannot meet together at this time, we can grow together in our knowledge of the Lord.

 I miss you. I miss seeing all of you and cannot wait until the day when we sit together in the church and worship together. Until then, let’s commit to growing in our walk so that when we are together again, we are even more dedicated to the Lord!

In Christ,

Andy Clapp

**April 1st**

*“But He was pierced because of our transgressions, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace was on Him, and we are healed by His wounds.” Isaiah 53:5*

 How far do you normally plan out your life? Do you keep to a five-year plan or perhaps a ten-year plan? Many of us set such goals and plans earlier on in life, then abandoned them because life changed, the times changed, and our overall direction in life changed. Today, we think about the plan of God and how it was fulfilled just the way it was prophesied to unfold.

A plan was in place long before it would unfold. A cross loomed hundreds of years on the horizon as God would send His Son to die for the wrongs we had committed. A perfect sacrifice was needed, and a perfect sacrifice was sent. With Isaiah’s prophecy, we see how God had a plan long before the day would dawn for the crucifixion of Jesus. He used the prophet to point to the cross.

 As we ready ourselves for the Easter season, we see how the cross brought us life. As Isaiah prophesied, “and we are healed by His wounds.” God, seeing the condition of the people He created, made a way for healing to come through the most unlikely of scenarios – His Son dying on a cross. When we look at Isaiah’s prophesy, we are amazed because it shows us how God had a plan far in advance.

 Where does the healing begin for all of us today? It begins at the cross of Christ. To see that the sin we committed was nailed to that cross as Jesus bore the sin and the punishment for us, we rejoice because from death came life. We are the beneficiaries. Christ gave the sacrifice. As we draw closer to Resurrection Sunday, let’s give pause today to thank God that He is out in front, He has a plan, and He is in control.

**Questions to Ponder:**

God stuck to the plan that He revealed through Isaiah. Knowing that, how does God’s follow through on His plan give you more reason to trust Him?

Seeing that Isaiah prophesied about events that occurred hundreds of years later, what does that teach us about God’s sovereignty?

**April 2nd**

*“When the days were coming to a close for Him to be taken up, He determined to journey to Jerusalem.” Luke 9:51*

 How many plans have we abandoned in our lives? A trail of unfinished projects and unfulfilled ambitions lay in piles around us. We begin but turn away before we reach the end. As we look at this passage in Luke today, we see the turn in Jesus’ ministry.

 The time was closing in for Jesus to be handed over, betrayed, beaten, and ultimately, be nailed upon the cross. He knew the time drew near and He knew the mission must be completed. As we read in Luke 9, He turned toward Jerusalem at that moment, and made His way to the place where His death would bring life. Could you imagine what He felt in that moment? With each step He took, He was one step closer to the cross. Each interaction was one less interaction He would have before He was nailed to a tree, dying for sins He didn’t commit.

 But yet, He made the turn and journeyed towards the cross. The King James Version of the Bible says that He “steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem.” He focused on Jerusalem and pleasing His Father. And He didn’t turn away. He knew what lay at the end of the journey and He continued towards the place where He would be nailed to the cross and lifted for all to see.

 Today, as we think about that moment, when Jesus set His face towards Jerusalem, we think about the commitment He made in that moment to us. Knowing what was ahead, He stepped towards the cross rather than delaying. The road set before Him was a road that led to death, but life came as a result in a manner that only God could perform.

**Questions to Ponder:**

The determination of Jesus is witnessed in this passage. How does His commitment to the cross, to go to Jerusalem though He knew what would transpire there, teach us about God’s commitment to His people?

How difficult do you believe those moments were as the cross drew closer? Thinking about that, what do we see about the focus of Jesus that we should apply to our focus in life?

**April 3rd**

*“For God loves the world in this way: He gave His One and Only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16*

 Most offerings in life have restrictions and limitations. Some promise that the first five hundred will receive the prize, while other offers are a limited time only. To receive some rewards, you must live in a particular place or buy something in order to get something. Jesus spoke to a Pharisee about an offer that stood for anyone and everyone who chose to accept it.

 Nicodemus came to meet with Jesus at night. The Pharisee wanted to know more about this Man from Nazareth who had created a storm with His ministry. As Nicodemus listens, Jesus utters the words that nearly every human has heard at some point in life, whether they are a believer or not. The words of John 3:16 are some of the most recited words of Scripture, but when we look deeper at them, we see that Jesus points to His death and the offering of life.

 Nicodemus had questions. Jesus was the answer. He teaches Nicodemus that God gave His Son so that whosoever believed in Him would have eternal life. The word “gave” is pointing to the cross. The word “whosoever” points to everyone. The offer wasn’t a limited time offer. From the cross, from the sacrifice of Jesus, anyone who believed in Him would find life. Eternal life.

 We are the whosoever. Whether rich or poor, short or tall, well-known or seemingly invisible, man or woman, we are offered life in Christ. All ages and all races have a chance to come to the cross and find life.

**Questions to Ponder:**

The words that Jesus spoke to Nicodemus teaches us that salvation and eternal life can come to anyone. How does that change the way we evangelize in our area?

Knowing that He came for all, how does that affect the way we value others?

**April 4th**

*“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and be raised on the third day.” Luke 9:22*

 Precision. We see occurrences in life where expectations are not met. We think an experience will be one way but when it happens, the actual experience is different than what we were told it would be. However, when Jesus pointed to the days coming and the cross, He precisely proclaimed what would transpire.

 His disciples would face a time of unrest when the crucifixion took place. Preparing these followers came in the form of explaining that He would die while promising He would rise again. In the moment, they could not understand it fully but later, once they saw it unfold, after they hunkered down in fear, and following their experiences with the resurrected Christ, they remembered the words He spoke to them on multiple occasions before it happened.

 When He pointed to the cross that day with the disciples, He also pointed to the empty grave. They would see the death on the cross but with His words, He tried to reassure them that, though it seemed like the end, it was only the beginning. He used those words to prepare them but also so they could look back and further trust what He said in recognition of the cross and the empty grave. If He could overcome death and the grave, surely everything else He said could be trusted.

 He pointed to the cross to ready them for the times they could not imagine facing. He pointed to the empty tomb to prepare them for the moment when He stepped out of the grave, alive forevermore.

**Questions to Ponder**

When they reflected on this teaching, they knew it to be true as they had witnessed it with their own eyes. How does this teaching about the cross and the resurrection help us to trust all that Jesus said?

Why was it important for Jesus to tell the disciples about the cross and the resurrection before it took place?

**April 5th**

*“The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people were looking for a way to destroy Him, but they could not find a way to do it, because all the people were captivated by what they heard.” Luke 19:47*

 Evil intentions lose out in the end. Remember watching the Saturday morning cartoons as a child. Do you remember the Roadrunner? Wile E. Coyote always hatched a plan to take down the Roadrunner, but the plan always backfired. Most of the time, the ACME product fizzled but when it did work, it worked to the Coyote’s disadvantage. His evil intentions were always undone. The Pharisees, scribes, and the leaders wanted Jesus destroyed. Shortly after these words in Luke, it appeared they had succeeded.

 His crucifixion would have to be handled by the Romans, but those with evil intentions were the pushing force. Their thought was to utterly defeat this Jesus of Nazareth and in doing so, stop anyone else from trying to do what He did. So, they pushed not only for His death, but an agonizing death on the cross, lifted high for all to see.

 As David Jeremiah noted, “Group crucifixions were common practice. The Romans staged such events as a public spectacle to remind passersby about who was in authority.” Those who wanted Jesus dead hoped for the same warning to come as Jesus hung on the cross. His destruction served their evil intentions.

 But it backfired. They were never truly in control. They were powerless against the power of God. Friday looked like a victory for them, but Sunday revealed their defeat. Evil lost and Jesus won. The cross, which was to serve as a warning against faith in Jesus, became the very symbol believers identify with even today as a sign of our faith.

**Questions to Ponder**

The plans of the leaders were evil as their desire was to destroy Jesus. What do we learn about overcoming evil through the cross of Christ?

What does this teach us about God’s ability to take what seems bad and use it for good?

**April 6th**

*“Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing.” Luke 23:34*

 One of the most incredible statements the world would ever hear was uttered by someone in the midst of dying. For us, we find challenges to forgive others on a daily basis. We struggle to truly offer forgiveness, but yet we expect complete exoneration when we fall short or fail someone. We hold grudges and those grudges slowly kill us from within, affecting other relationships in our lives and affecting our witness to the world. Bitterness can grow from even the smallest wrong committed against us. Yet while hanging on a cross, forgiveness flowed.

 Looking out at the very ones who had driven nails through His feet and hands, He called out to the Father, asking for forgiveness for those who took part in putting Him to death. Father, forgive them. He could have called out for the Father to destroy them. He could have prayed that the Father would avenge Him, destroying those responsible. But when He called out, He offered forgiveness.

 Forgiveness is the invitation for life to begin again. When forgiveness is given, new life is breathed into relationships. Where forgiveness is found, love is at the core. He forgave the very ones who hated Him, the ones who sought to destroy Him, the ones who would go to any length to silence Him. By offering forgiveness in such an extreme scenario, Christ taught us that forgiveness is part of the message of the cross.

 Forgiveness must be given if forgiveness is to be obtained. Jesus said as much in Matthew 6:14-15. The forgiveness we need is found at the cross and when we accept it, we find new life. When we offer forgiveness as Jesus did, we speak life and give others a reflection of what life is like in Jesus.

**Questions to Ponder**

Why do we need forgiveness and why are you thankful for the forgiveness that the Lord offers?

Who and what do you need to forgive in order to truly be like Christ in your life?

**April 7th**

*“The governor asked them, ‘Which of the two do you want me to release for you?’ ‘Barabbas!’ they answered.”*

*Matthew 27:21*

 We use the phrase “He took my place” when we think of the cross. Have we ever taken the time to absorb the fullness of what it means? In life, others stand in for us in those moments when we are not available. A grandparent attends a function that a parent cannot attend so a child feels loved and supported. Friends stand in our place when a commitment cannot be upheld. Family members step up when we cannot be in two places at one time. “He took my place” takes on a deeper meaning in light of the cross.

 Barabbas stood accused, rightly, and on that night, two men stood before a crowd. One would be set free. The other would die. Barabbas had committed serious crimes while Jesus had committed no wrong. As they stood, the crowd cried out for Barabbas to be released, though his guilt was without question. Jesus took the place of Barabbas. The criminal was set free while the innocent stood condemned.

 When we look at the cross, do we see how we are Barabbas? We committed the wrongs but the innocent, perfect Lamb of God took our place on the cross. The cross was ours to bear. The debt was ours to pay but Jesus took our place and as He did, set us free through the shedding of His blood for our sins.

 We had a date with a cross. We stood condemned until He bore our sin and shame as He was nailed to the cross at Calvary. The cross is a reminder that we were on death row until the Lord intervened and gave us a chance at new life by carrying out the sentence we deserved.

**Questions to Ponder:**

Barabbas deserved the punishment because of the choices he made. We deserved such a punishment ourselves. When you see that Jesus took your place on the cross, how does that humble you?

How does Jesus taking your place give you a sense of new life, knowing that your sin debt was wiped away?

**April 8th**

*“Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom!” Luke 23:42*

 Two viewpoints stood in opposition as two thieves hung on each side of Jesus. The first one to speak reflected much of our mindset in life. We ask Jesus to fix our temporary, focused more heavily on the here and now than we focus on eternity. The draw to focus on this minute is all around us and we find ourselves with such an outlook many times. In the scene from the cross, we see the clash between temporary and the eternal.

 The first thief wanted immediate deliverance. He had heard of Jesus, referring to Him as the Messiah. In the agony of the moment, he yelled insults at Jesus, astonished that this Man who had the power to take Himself off the cross refused to use His power to do so. The thief not only wanted Jesus to take Himself off the cross but also deliver the two hanging beside Him. The thief said, “Save Yourself and us!” (Luke 23:39) Such a request is somewhat understandable. He wanted to live a little while longer but to do so, he needed Jesus to help him immediately.

 The second thief’s focus was eternal. Rather than asking Jesus to get him out of the mess he found himself in, he asked Jesus to remember him when He came into His kingdom. He looked towards eternity in the midst of the painful temporary. The two thieves were separated by what held more value in their eyes. One only saw the here and now, while the other looked to everything that awaited after that moment.

 What do you see when you look at the cross? One thief squandered an opportunity because he could only see the here and now. The other found eternal life through the One who hung on a cross in the center.

**Questions to Ponder**

Our struggle with focus is a daily struggle. At the cross, how do we see the missed opportunity due to a temporary focus?

How does the attitude of the second thief, the one who asked to be remembered, teach us to handle temporary struggles in life?

**April 9th**

*“Going a little farther, He fell facedown and prayed, ‘My Father! If it is possible, let this cup pass from Me. Yet not as I will, but as You will.’” Matthew 26:39*

 Life gives us challenges and situations we want to avoid. To be given a choice to escape something rather than endure it is an opportunity we’d choose nearly every time a struggle presents itself. There are times where we must endure. Some situations and circumstances are unavoidable. Our will is to find the easiest road possible, the path of least resistance, and travel down that path. Yet the life of faith is never to be about our will.

 In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus knew the hour was quickly approaching. In distress, He cried out to the Father on three occasions, asking the Father to remove the cup if at all possible. What did the cup signify? The cross. Three requests were submitted. The Father’s silence meant the Son had to endure. The will of the Father took precedence over the will of the Son, as evidenced by Jesus’ prayer. What the Father’s silence meant was there was no other way.

 Here is where the cross becomes so vital in the life of all people, whether they know it or not. The cross is unavoidable. At the cross, we trade in our will for the will of the Father and at the cross, we see that there is only one way. Through Jesus, the blood shed on the cross, is how we find salvation and eternal life. The blood of the Lamb atoned for the sins we committed.

 At the cross, the will of God was satisfied. The Son pleased the Father through obedience and submission to the Father’s will.

**Questions to Ponder**

Life is full of wants, wishes, and desires. On most days, does God’s will for your life supersede your own will or do you choose your way over God’s way?

How does the submission of Jesus to the will of the Father help us to see the importance of submitting to the will of God in our lives?

**April 10th**

*“When Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, ‘It is finished!’ Then bowing His head, He gave up His spirit.”*

*John 19:30*

 Three words. It is FINISHED! As He spoke those words, He took His last breath. Jesus died on the cross, giving up His spirit and served as the sacrifice needed for our sins to be atoned for. Over the years, many have doubted whether He died on the cross or if He was still alive when He was taken off the cross. John made a note of Jesus’s condition in verses 33-34, pointing out the piercing of the side. The soldiers did not need to break the legs of Christ because He was already dead. When His side was pierced, blood and water flowed.

 The cross became the place of completion at that moment. God had a plan and it was fulfilled when the last breath came from Jesus’s lungs after He said it was finished. Every detail accounted for, the Lamb was slain, and no sacrifice would ever be needed again. The price was paid in full and the lifeless Savior was taken down and placed in a tomb. What is to be seen here is that there must be a death for a resurrection to occur. That Friday, the sacrifice was complete, but the story was far from over.

 Those who watched believed this to be the end, but He had previously told them that He would rise again. On Good Friday, He completed the sacrifice, carried out the plan of the Father so redemption could follow for those who accept Christ as Savior and Lord. What Isaiah had spoken of hundreds of years earlier was complete.

 Three words. One last breath. Jesus had died in our place. The cross stood stained with blood as the final sacrifice needed had taken place.

**Questions to Ponder**

We have heard the story of the cross much of our lives. What do you think of, what feelings do you have, when you hear the verse of Scripture when Jesus said, “It is finished”?

Seeing that this part of God’s plan was completed just as God had told it would happen, how does that help you to trust that God will carry out His work in our life to completion?

**April 11th**

*“When the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that happened, they were terrified and said, ‘This man really was God’s Son!” Matthew 27:54*

 Some occurrences will open your eyes. The birth of a child gives us a new perspective on what it means to love. The death of a friend or family member provides us with insight into the brevity of life, nudging us to take advantage of the time we are given. A season of rain makes us thankful to see the sun, while a period of drought leads us to praise God for the rain. Perspective comes from experience and what those at the cross experienced that day brought about revelation.

 After Jesus gave up His spirit, breathed His last breath, Matthew told of the events that unfolded. The curtain of the sanctuary split in two. The tombs were opened, and bodies came forth. The earth quaked and rocks were split in two. Luke noted that darkness came over the whole land from roughly noon until three. Something had happened. And that something led the centurion and those with him to reassess the man who had just been put to death.

 Before the moment of His death, some said He was a prophet. Some believed He was the Messiah. Others saw Him as a threat and some even believed He was an enemy to Rome. During His three years of ministry, much speculation existed over His identity, but after He died, those at the foot of the cross no longer question. What took place revealed to them that the Man on the cross was indeed the Son of God.

 The whole earth shook. The sky turned black. The veil was torn in two and the rocks split in two. Tombs were opened and eyes were opened in that moment.

**Questions to Ponder**

After He gave up His spirit, the whole earth was shaken. Why do you believe that it was at that moment that the centurion finally believed that Jesus was the Son of God?

How does the cross open our eyes each day? Why should it be that the cross gives us perspective in life?

**April 12th**

*“Why are you looking among the dead?’ asked the men. ‘He is not here, but He has been resurrected!’” Luke 24:5-6*

 Death gave way to life. During His ministry, Jesus had raised others from the dead. Most notably, He called Lazarus out of the grave after His friend had passed days prior. They had seen His power to be able to call others out of dead and back to life, but could He overcome the grave Himself?

 The thought was that He couldn’t. We can say that with certainty because they had travelled to the tomb with the expectation that Jesus would still be in the tomb. Luke points out that the women brought spices with them to prepare the body. Mark made reference to the fact that the women wondered who would roll the stone away for them. The disciples were certain He was still dead as they didn’t even venture out to the grave until reports came back about His resurrection.

 They saw death on display at the cross. Could death really give way to life? As experienced on Resurrection Sunday, not even the grave could hold Jesus down. He who had died on the cross was resurrected, just as He had proclaimed, He would do. Fear had shackled the disciples, as well as sadness, when they saw Jesus taken from the cross. Faith became the driving force of their lives when they saw and experienced the resurrected Lord.

 The stone was rolled away. He who was dead had emerged alive and victorious over the grave. The sadness and somberness of Friday gave way to celebration and joy as Jesus overcame the grave and they saw Him alive again.

**Questions to Ponder**

Jesus had promised that He would rise again. How did the fulfillment of that promise affect the disciples and how does it affect your trust in the words that He spoke?

As Christ overcame the grave, how does that strengthen our faith, not only at Easter, but throughout our lives, regardless of what circumstances we are facing?

**April 13th**

*“Then He said to them all, ‘If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of Me will save it.” Luke 9:23-24*

 We have spent nearly two weeks looking at the cross of Christ. We saw that God laid the plan out far in advance, speaking through Isaiah about what would come. The cross is a place where God’s will was fulfilled and the cross is the place where we find perspective. Jesus took Barabbas’ place and He took our place when He was nailed to the cross. Scripture has opened our eyes to truth and the magnitude of the cross. Now, we see that the cross becomes a charge to us.

 Jesus spoke, teaching that those who truly wanted to follow Him have a cross to bear as well. There is a word that is often missed in these words that Jesus spoke. The word is daily. Jesus didn’t say that we were to deny ourselves and take up our cross on Sunday. He said that those who truly wanted to follow Him had to do that daily. But the next verse tells us that taking up that cross, denying ourselves and following Him is a decision worth making. Jesus said that such a decision meant we would find life.

 We are living today but have we truly found life? Followers of Christ are called to a commitment, a deep commitment, the same type of complete commitment that Jesus showed when He went to the cross. Living begins with dying as we die to ourselves in order to live for Him.

 So, we now investigate our lives. Are you alive? Have you found life, or have you spent your life looking in the wrong places? Jesus gave the path to life. The choice is ours as to whether or not we follow.

**Questions to Ponder**

The call from Jesus was to deny ourselves and take up our cross daily. Are we fully denying ourselves to follow Him or do we only follow Him when it’s convenient? What is the danger of convenient Christianity?

What does it mean to follow Him?

**April 14th**

*“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” Galatians 2:19-20*

 Paul had known the trappings of the world, then he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. Though he was called Saul at the time of conversion, Paul later wrote to the Galatian people about who he had become through Jesus. The cross became a defining symbol for Paul as he wrote these words to the Galatian believers. He assured them that the live he lived was no longer his, but it was the Lord’s.

 He said he had been crucified with Christ. He had died to who he had been and all that he had known and longed for before. In that, he found life. What did it all mean? For Paul, he identified with the death of Jesus and when he began following Jesus, God saw that the price had been paid, so Paul no longer stood condemned. Furthermore, the Spirit took up residence in his life, bringing to him a new life, one no longer defined by the past or by the world.

 Paul wrote to the Philippians that everything that had once been gain to him he no longer considered to be gain. Those things were worthless in comparison to knowing Christ. His relationship with the Lord totally changed his life, giving him new life while putting to death the old way of living.

 Death led to life. The death of what was opened the door for new life to begin. He no longer held on to the world that was passing away. Paul was holding on to the One who overcame the world and in doing so, gave him a new life and a new purpose for living.

**Questions to Ponder**

Paul says that he was crucified with Christ. His old way of life had been set aside and a new life began. Do you feel you have been crucified with Christ as Paul had been? Has your old way of life passed away so you can walk in new life?

How has the Lord provided you with new life through the cross of Christ?