

## Luke 23:32-34

<sup>32</sup>Two other men, who were criminals, were led away with Jesus to be executed.

<sup>33</sup>When they came to the place called The Skull, they crucified him there with the criminals, one on his right and the other on his left.

<sup>34</sup>Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” They cast lots to divide his garments among them.

## Nail-Pierced Hands

### I.

Were you there? That old African-American spiritual seems to border on the accusing as it asks that question again and again. Were you there on Good Friday? Were you there when they crucified my Lord...when they nailed him to the tree...when they laid him in the tomb?

Think about some of those who *were* there at Calvary—some of those who played prominent roles in our Savior’s passion.

Some Roman soldiers were there. They *had* to be. It was their job. They carried it out with brutal efficiency. None of them realized when they drove home the nails and divided Jesus’ clothes that they were fulfilling prophecies which were hundreds of years old.

One of the soldiers—a centurion—*did* recognize that the man hanging on the middle cross was different. “When the centurion and those who were guarding Jesus with him saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they were terrified and said, ‘Truly this was the Son of God’” (Matthew 27:54, EHV).

Two other criminals were there. They didn’t have a choice, either. They were being punished for their crimes. One even acknowledged it: “We are punished justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for what we have done, but this man has done nothing wrong.’<sup>42</sup> Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom.’<sup>43</sup> Jesus said to him, ‘Amen I tell you: Today you will be with me in paradise’” (Luke 23:41-43, EHV).

The Jewish leaders were there. Perhaps they wanted to make sure Pilate would follow through on his pledge to execute Jesus. They had waited a long time for this. They were going to relish it. In their minds they had won a great victory. Rather than just being smug winners, they went a step farther. They taunted and jeered and challenged Jesus to come down from his cross, totally oblivious to the fact that he could descend at any moment and destroy them all.

Even if Pontius Pilate was not physically present at Golgotha, he made his presence known. “Pilate also had a notice written and fastened on the cross. It read, ‘Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews’” (John 19:19, EHV). When some asked him to change what he had written, the Roman governor finally grew a backbone and denied their request; but for Pilate it was too little, too late.

It would be nice to be able to say that all the disciples were there to give support to their Lord in his dying hours. They weren’t. They had deserted Jesus the night before in the Garden. They abandoned him in his time of need, just as Jesus had predicted. Only one

disciple—John—had come to Calvary.

By John's side stood Jesus' mother, Mary. What she witnessed must have made her heart break. As a young girl she had received the amazing news from the angel Gabriel that God had chosen *her* to give birth to the promised Messiah. Not long after Jesus was born, she received some news that wasn't so good. In the temple at Jerusalem Simeon predicted that a sword would pierce Mary's soul. As she watched her Son slowly dying before her eyes, Mary could finally understand exactly what those words meant.

## II.

Working through this list of those who *were* there helps us remember the places and the events and the people of Good Friday, but it doesn't answer the original question: "Were *you* there?" The obvious answer is, "no." We weren't there. We are separated from that day by thousands of miles and thousands of years. Unless we have access to a time machine it would be impossible for us to be there.

Of course, there is another way to look at the question. There is another hymn that suggests a different answer. We sang the first part a few moments ago. It is hymn 140: "God Was There on Calvary." Listen carefully to what the hymn writer says in verse 2: "All the world on Calvary, Crucified the Prince of life, Pierced the hands of God's own Son, There on Calvary."

If those poetic words are true—if the entire *world* was there on Calvary on Good Friday—then you *were* there. So was I. We didn't come up with the charges used to convict Jesus. We didn't hand down the order to crucify. None of us grabbed the hammer and nails to fasten Jesus to the cross, but we were there—because our sins were there. Jesus carried them there. On the cross he bore the crushing burden of the sins of humanity.

What *that* all means is that *our* sin is the reason God's Son had to suffer and die. It means that you and I are no less guilty than the people who were directly responsible for Jesus' death. If that's hard for you to believe, don't look around and compare yourself to the Roman soldiers or the Jewish leaders or the AWOL disciples or anyone else there on Good Friday. Look up at the cross. Look deep inside *yourself* and examine your heart. Compare yourself with Jesus.

## III.

Have you ever run across one of these giant billboards? "Real Christians FORGIVE like Jesus." Is the idea to encourage people who pass by? It has the opposite effect on me. Jesus taught plenty of lessons about forgiveness. He told us to turn the other cheek; he said forgive not 7 times, but 70 *times* 7; he taught about the prodigal son; and many others. From the cross Jesus prayed: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34, EHV). Pondering the selfless love of Jesus is a great blessing.

But when I think of that saying: "real Christians forgive like Jesus," I start drawing some comparisons with my *own* life. I have said hurtful things. I have done vengeful things. I have withheld forgiveness and held on to grudges. My mind comes to this logical conclusion: if "real Christians forgive like Jesus," what does that make me? What about *you*? It makes all of us guilty. We are not at all able to follow in Jesus' footsteps. We are not at all deserving of God's love. We are in desperate need of a miracle to be rescued from our sins.

The One who had done so many miracles during his ministry didn't look like a miracle

worker on Good Friday. He looked weak and helpless. Stripped of his clothing. Stripped of his dignity. Bloodied. Beaten. Unable to carry his cross. Barely able to stand. Defeated. The devil had won the day.

The celebration in hell turned out to be short-lived. The Messiah was about to perform his greatest miracle of all. To declare his final victory over the devil, to demonstrate his power over death, to announce to the world that reports of his demise had been greatly exaggerated, and to assure you that all your sins have been forgiven—Jesus holds out to you his nail-pierced hands.

It was a couple days after Good Friday. The disciples—the same people who were nowhere to be found on Calvary—gathered together behind locked doors. They were confused about what had just happened. They were fearful of the future.

Then...what they *thought* was a ghost appeared among them. In reality, it was the Lord. He brought them a message of peace. Then he did something else—something that immediately calmed their fears—he showed them his hands.

Scars are not usually attractive. For the disciples, those nail-pierced hands were the most beautiful thing they had ever seen. Through their eyes, we see those hands, too. Those wounds remind us of the high cost of our redemption. Jesus took on human flesh. He felt pain. He endured the righteous wrath of God in our place. He prayed for *our* forgiveness there on the cross. Then...he suffered and died to earn it.

#### IV.

The unconditional, sacrificial love of Jesus is what makes Good Friday good. When your sins condemn you, he intercedes for you. When Satan seeks to devour you, Jesus will defend you. When you are feeling guilty and totally unworthy of God's love, remember what Jesus has done to save you. Remember that he will never leave you or forsake you. Remember that he has ascended into heaven to prepare a place for you.

If all this sounds too good to be true, look up. Look to the cross. Look to Jesus. Look at your living Savior's nail-pierced hands. Amen.