

“To Lay Down His Life” – Matthew 26:1-6

Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, was born to die.

Our God is a holy God, a perfectly just God. Every sin must be punished to satisfy His justice. It is bad news for us, because we're all sinners and the wage of sin is the second death, an eternity of enduring the wrath of God, an eternity of the most excruciating torment, wishing you had never been born, wishing you could simply cease to exist. But God loves you so much, that He found a way to satisfy His justice while saving you from that eternal torment.

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

Two weeks from today, we will celebrate Jesus' resurrection. All human history pivots around that incredible event, but before Jesus could rise from the dead, He had to die. He had to drink the cup of God's wrath that you and I deserve. So, I feel led to take a short break from our study of 2 Thessalonians. I want all of us to meditate on what our salvation cost Jesus.

Jesus is the Great Shepherd. And if you have submitted to His Lordship by faith alone, you are part of His flock. Oh, how He loves His sheep! As we opened the service this morning, I read from John, Chapter 10.

I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd. (John 10:14-16)

Just about 2,000 years ago, Jesus laid down His life for His sheep. Now, He is in the process of gathering the rest of His flock. And there is only one flock.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

Have you heard His voice? Have you recognized your Good Shepherd? Are you running to Him, recognizing just how much He loves you?

Before we read our text this morning, let me lay out the context. It is Tuesday of what we call the Passion week. Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem has taken place. He accomplished the second cleansing of the Temple. He has been challenged by the Pharisees and the Sadducees. With impeccable logic and holy scripture, he triumphed over every challenge. (His opponents learned that if you want to engage in a battle of wits, you best not come in unarmed!) He has pronounced judgment on the religious elite. He passionately lamented their unbelief and predicted the utter destruction of their empty religion.

See! Your house is left to you desolate; (Matthew 23:38)

On the way out of town late Tuesday afternoon, the disciples marveled at the glorious beauty of Jerusalem.

And Jesus said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down." (Matthew 24:2)

In response to their questions, as recorded in Matthew 24 and 25, Jesus predicted the destruction of Jerusalem, and the sign of His coming at the end of the age. That's the context, and it was the discourse of Matthew 24 and 25 that is referred to in verse 1. So now, let's look at our text:

Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished all these sayings, that He said to His disciples, "You know that after two days is the Passover, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified." Then the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders of the people assembled at the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and plotted to take Jesus by trickery and kill Him. But they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people." (Matthew 26:1-5)

When Jesus said, "after two days is the Passover", he was reminding the disciples of something they already knew. It was Tuesday, and they would eat the Passover meal on Thursday evening. Believe it or not, this is important information for us, too.

Jesus had predicted His death over and over again. The disciples certainly should have seen it coming. He would be murdered by sinful men. Make no mistake, the crucifixion was the most heinous crime ever committed in all of human history. But God remained completely in control. Jesus was completely in control. We'll see this explicitly illustrated a little bit later.

The Passover was instituted during the Exodus. Turn with me to Exodus, Chapter 12. God is giving instruction to Moses about what the nation is to do.

Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying: 'On the tenth of this month every man shall take for himself a lamb, according to the house of his father, a lamb for a household. And if the household is too small for the lamb, let him and his neighbor next to his house take it according to the number of the persons; according to each man's need you shall make your count for the lamb. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats. Now you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month. Then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it at twilight. And they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses where they eat it. Then they shall eat the flesh on that night; roasted in fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs they shall eat it. Do not eat it raw, nor boiled at all with water, but roasted in fire—its head with its legs and its entrails. You shall let none of it remain until morning, and what remains of it until morning you shall burn with fire. And thus you shall eat it: with a belt on your waist, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. So you shall eat it in haste. It is the LORD's Passover. 'For I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the LORD. Now the blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you; and the plague shall not be on you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. 'So this day shall be to you a memorial; and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD throughout your generations. You shall keep it as a feast by an everlasting ordinance. (Exodus 12:3-14)

Now, I can imagine being in the congregation of Israel when Moses related these commands. If I had been there I think I would be saying to myself, "What? What in the world is this all about? We're going to take a lamb into our household, then slaughter it and put some of its blood on the entrance to the house? We're going to call it the Lord's Passover. And then we're going to keep this Passover as a yearly feast? What does it all mean?"

Well, here is what it is about. It is a picture, a type, an illustration of God's gracious salvation. And they were to keep the feast to remember, to remind themselves of how God liberated them from slavery in Egypt. But more importantly, it was pointing toward the perfect Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus would be sacrificed, His blood shed, to liberate us from the slavery of sin. The entire Old Testament, Levitical sacrificial system pointed to the coming perfect sacrifice found in Jesus Christ. It was the will of Almighty God.

By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (Hebrews 10:10)

He is the Lamb that takes away the sin of the world. This amazing plan of redemption was God's will all along. And isn't it interesting how God even superintends the actions of sinful men to carry out His perfect will. The chief priests, the scribes, and the elders of the people got together at Caiaphas' house to hatch a murder conspiracy. Only, they said,

"Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people." (Matthew 26:5)

Right! Like they could determine the place or the time God had already ordained. Jesus would die on His timetable, not at the whim of those determined to kill Him. God ordained that Jesus Christ would be sacrificed during the Passover feast; How could it be any other time?

Which brings me to a very important point and I want to make this abundantly clear. This was a voluntary sacrifice. It was no cosmic mistake. God didn't say, "Okay, I'll send my Son, and He will proclaim the way of life and death and everybody will accept Him and listen to Him and follow Him ... Oh, they crucified Him! I didn't see that coming!"

NO! God knew exactly what was going to happen. Jesus knew exactly what was going to happen. And Jesus knew when it was going to happen.

"You know that after two days is the Passover, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified." (Matthew 26:2)

That wasn't just prescience. That wasn't Jesus looking into the future and seeing what was going to happen. That was Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost superintending even the evil acts of reprobate men to carry out His plan of redemption, right on schedule!

Our entire Old Testament points to this event. All the way back in Genesis, Chapter 3, we read about God pronouncing His curse on Satan.

"And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel." (Genesis 3:15)

The Seed of the woman is Jesus. And yes, Satan would bruise His heel. He would be spitefully treated, tortured and put to death.

But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5)

The grave had no chance against Jesus. Satan isn't even in the same league. Yes, the devil would bruise His heel, but Jesus would conquer both sin and death and He would rise from the grave. In doing so, He would crush the enemy once and for all.

Why did He do it? Why did our Lord go through all that? He gave up His eternal glory to enter the world He created. He lived a perfect human life ... completely free of sin. He allowed Himself to be murdered in the most excruciating way. He drank, full strength, the cup of wrath I deserve! Why did He do it?

Because He wanted to! Because He loves you! Because He wants you to spend eternity with Him.

Jesus' sacrifice was voluntary. Jesus was a willing sacrifice.

As the cohort came to arrest Him in the garden, Peter tried to take a stand. Remember that? He swung His sword at a guy named Malchus, and cut off his ear. By the way, I don't think for a minute that he was aiming for the ear. The lesson: fishermen don't necessarily make the best swordsmen. But do you remember what Jesus said at that moment?

But Jesus said to him, "Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels? How then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus?" (Matthew 26:52-54)

Jesus went to the cross because He wanted to. Not only that, He died on His timetable. Do you remember how Pilate was surprised that Jesus had already died when they came to break His legs?

*So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And bowing His head, **He gave up His spirit.** (John 19:30)*

This is all about the power of Almighty God. God is sovereign. God is always in complete control. Listen to what Jesus told His disciples:

*"Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. **No one takes it from Me**, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father." (John 10:17-18)*

Jesus laid down His life so that you could live. Jesus took His life up again so you could have a living relationship with Him. The work of salvation is finished. Jesus ascended back to heaven and sat down at the right hand of the Father and He is watching as those sheep that are not yet of the fold are gathered to Him. He is calling you.

Can you hear His voice? Can you hear the voice of the One who laid down His life, the One who endured the agonies of hell so you wouldn't have to?

He is calling you. Just say "yes" to Him, and be gathered into His fold.