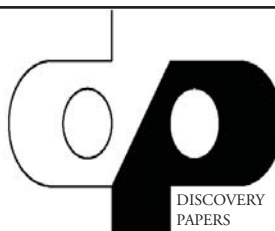


PAIN AT THE CROSS

SERIES: SEVEN LAST WORDS



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Matthew 27:45-49
4th Message
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Imagine that you are working on a little home project. You have to hammer a nail into a small block of wood. So you pick up the hammer in one hand. You pick up the nail in the other hand. Carefully, you hold the nail against the wood and you swing the hammer. This first one is just a little tap, you're just trying to get the nail started. Then you start to swing a little bit harder, but you're still holding on the nail. And then ... BAM! You miss the nail and hit your thumb with a full force hammer swing.

How do you respond? Do you cry? Yell? Curse? How do you respond to sudden, instant pain? That's our topic for the morning. How do we respond to pain? How are we supposed to respond to pain?

To get us thinking about that, we're going to look at one of the most famous philosophers of our time to see what he has to say about pain. This philosopher is short, uses really awkward grammar, has pointy green ears and goes by the name of "Yoda." There is a scene from *Star Wars Episode III*; Anakin Skywalker has been having what he calls premonitions of his wife dying. He wants to figure out how to handle them, so he goes to talk to Yoda about them. In their conversation, we find that Yoda and Anakin have vastly different responses on how to deal with these premonitions.

Anakin is faced with pain—the loss of someone he loves. His response to the pain is to avoid it. He says, "I won't let these visions come true." Anakin is willing to do anything to make sure that this pain doesn't happen. Pain is the enemy. As the story progresses, we realize that his choice ends up destroying him.

Yoda's answer is exactly the opposite. "Train yourself to let go of everything you fear to lose." He basically says, "don't let it bother you." Ascend above your pain. Death is natural. Let go. When you do that, pain becomes an illusion—it doesn't affect you.

These are two of the options that our world gives us for dealing with pain. Avoid it or ascend above it. Either make sure it doesn't happen or make sure it doesn't bother you. That's what we are taught. We're going to face pain—that much is guaranteed. So how are we going to handle it? Avoid or ascend? Or is there another choice?

That's the question we will ask as we consider the fourth statement that Jesus made from the cross. This morning we're continuing our Lenten series called *Seven Last Words* where we've been taking one statement each week that Jesus made from the cross and using it to guide us into a deeper experience of the cross. Today we look at the fourth word, which is one of the most difficult statements in all of Scripture to understand. It is a cry of pain. It is a cry of loneliness. It is a cry that we are familiar with, but terrified of. At his darkest hour, Jesus asked the question that all of us have asked at one time or another, "God, where are you? How can you let me go through this terrible situation?"

As we look at this statement, we're going to think a bit about what exactly Jesus was experiencing. We'll talk about the physical experience that Jesus endured on the cross. Some of the details of what might have happened can help us to enter into that moment in a new way. We'll see that Jesus doesn't avoid his pain nor does he ascend above it. Somehow he goes right through it, but he also seems to know that his pain isn't all there is. Jesus gives us an incredible example of how to suffer and how to hope in the midst of it. As we follow his example, we'll learn how to face pain in our own lives.

The Physical Pain of Crucifixion

Let's start by reading the passage for this morning. This is the only statement that Jesus made that is recorded by two different gospel authors. Both Matthew and Mark include this statement. Both authors list it as the only thing that Jesus said from the cross in their accounts.

Matthew 27:45-49:

⁴⁵From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. ⁴⁶About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ⁴⁷When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah." ⁴⁸Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. ⁴⁹The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him."

This is one of the most difficult scenes on the cross. Darkness has covered the land. Jesus cried out a desperate cry asking God where he has gone. Even in his anguish, he is misunderstood. They confuse the Aramaic for “My God” with the name of “Elijah” and give him a drink to help him wait for rescue, but no rescue is coming. Jesus has been forsaken on the cross. His pain is truly more than we can imagine.

To start off, we want to try and get a better sense of what he was going through. There are several studies done of the physical experience of Jesus at the cross. The most common one is a book by a man named Pierre Barbet called *A Doctor at Calvary*, published in 1950. He suggests that crucifixion causes the individual not to be able to breathe. The person on the cross cannot breathe while they are in a normal position, so they must scoot up the cross to breathe and then slide back down when they are exhausted. Finally, they are too tired to move into a position where they can breathe, so they suffocate to death. This theory has been popularized and spread through a lot of books and Bible studies.

But some more recent research has shown that Barbet’s research was flawed. In a recent book, a forensic pathologist by the name of Frederick Zugibe offers some new thoughts on what actually happened at the cross. His book, called *The Crucifixion of Jesus* is fascinating. I would recommend it to anyone who is interested in this.

Now, the truth is that we can’t know exactly what happened physically to Jesus. The text doesn’t give us all the answers, so there is a lot of speculation of the specifics of all of this. I’m going to summarize much of Zugibe’s work as a way of helping us to have a fuller picture of what happened to Jesus. Our purpose this morning is not to be precisely right in all the details. Much of this is informed speculation, but the details give us something concrete to think about on what it might have been like.

Jesus’ physical pain began hours before the crucifixion: at Gethsemane. This was Thursday night just before he was arrested. He went to a certain place to pray and in Luke 22:44 we read, “Being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.”

Jesus was clearly in significant distress at this point. He knew that he was going to his death because he had told his disciples that earlier. He seemed to understand the basic plan. But he was scared. Yes, Jesus was scared. Even more surprising, he wanted out. He wanted there to be a different way. “Isn’t there any other way that we can do

this,” he asks.

Dr. Zugibe, in his book, describes an extremely rare medical condition called Hematidrosis. It is the actual occurrence of blood being contained within drops of sweat. It’s very likely that this is what the gospel author Luke is describing. This is a real, but rare, medical condition with only a few known cases happening in the last century or so. But the cases that are known are often of individuals who are nervous, excited, worried, or scared. It is a state of mental or emotional distress that causes this physical symptom. In several cases, it had occurred when the individual was facing death, either through execution or warfare. So hours before the cross, Jesus experienced such extreme mental anguish that his body reacted in this way. This would already have weakened him significantly through fluid and blood loss.

Then, he is arrested. He is kept awake all night and shuffled between various political powers as they try to figure out what to do with him. Once his fate is finally decided, it begins with a Roman flogging. This was done with what’s called a flagrum. It was probably a leather whip with three strands at the end, each of which had some small metal shrapnel at the end. When you were flogged with this whip, those metal pieces would dig into your skin and rip away your flesh. Roman prisoners slated for execution were usually given a mild beating because the whole idea of crucifixion was to keep you on the cross suffering for a long time. But it seems that Pilate had Jesus flogged before deciding to crucify him. So he would have been flogged nearly to death and then he would have been crucified. This is probably why Jesus died so quickly on the cross while the other criminals were still alive.

So Jesus’s ordeal began in Gethsemane, it continued with a particularly cruel flogging, then comes the crown of thorns. This was a woven crown of thorns pushed into Jesus’s scalp. There is a medical condition called Trigeminal Neuralgia that is essentially an irritation of the nerves in the scalp. It causes bouts of pain in the face that patients describe as “feeling like stabbing electric shocks, burning, pressing, crushing, exploding or shooting pain that becomes intractable.” Having a crown of thorns pressed into his head and beaten during the process would likely have caused Jesus to experience this and he’s not even on the cross yet.

Next, they tried to get Jesus to carry the cross to his spot of execution. This was the normal process for crucifying someone. They would probably be carrying only the crossbar of the cross as they walked through town. The point of this was to humiliate the individual and to offer

an example to deter other people from the same crime. Jesus wasn't able to complete that journey. The text says that he fell down several times and the Romans eventually had to get someone else to carry his cross. That's another indication that Jesus was in much worse shape than most people being crucified generally would have been.

Jesus finally made it to Golgotha, the Skull, and he's ready to be crucified. He already experienced hematidrosis, he was beaten close to death, he experienced sharp stinging pains in his face, blood is poured down his body, he was hungry, he probably vomited several times from the pain, he's had severe blood loss, there was probably fluid gathered around his lungs from the beating, and then the crucifixion began.

First, his shreds of clothing were pulled off his body, full of bruises and open wounds. The soldiers pushed him to the ground and one of them held him down while another nailed his hands to the crossbar. The particular place that the nail might have gone through in his palm is one of the most painful places in the body to be pierced. Finally, the crossbar was raised over the upright section of the cross which was probably already in the ground. The crossbar was laid on top, probably more in the shape of a "T" than what we would think of as a cross. Jesus's feet were nailed to the bottom of the cross. Even the process of getting up would have been excruciating after all that Jesus had been through.

Now Jesus hung on the cross. In order to understand what exactly happened on the cross, Dr. Zugibe actually enlisted the help of college students and hung them on crosses to see what they experienced. He fashioned special leather strips to simulate the way their arms and feet would have been secured to the cross and measured all sorts of medical tests while they hung on the cross. None of them had trouble breathing, which is what led him to question the idea that Jesus suffocated to death on the cross.

But even if he didn't suffocate to death, the cross was incredibly painful. The point of the cross, though, was to prolong that pain. This was an execution that was designed to bring about death by torture. They would be suffering blood loss, pain in the hands and feet, their chest area would be constricted, there would be severe pain in the shoulders from the weight of the body, and their legs would tighten with pain in the knees and feet. Eventually, this person would die. Sometimes it would be cardiac failure, sometimes respiratory failure, sometimes the body would just shut down. For Jesus, Dr. Zugibe concludes that cause of death to be "Cardiac and respiratory arrest, due to hypovolemic (blood loss) and traumatic shock, due to

crucifixion." It would be fair to say that Jesus actually died from all the pain he experienced.

That's crucifixion.

Suffer

So what do we do with all of this? What conclusions should we make now that we have a better idea of what Jesus went through? How does this help us to figure out how we are supposed to suffer pain? The first observation is the simple fact that Jesus suffered a lot of pain. Jesus experienced real pain at the cross.

Sometimes we have a mental picture of Jesus at the crucifixion as if he is perfectly composed. He is calm and peaceful and riding above everything that is happening to him. You hear people say that the spiritual pain was worse than the physical pain because God isn't really bothered by physical pain. It's like Jesus managed to take Yoda's advice to heart. He has let go of the troublesome issue of physical pain and he is no longer attached to anything of this earth. His deep spiritual connection to God allowed him to experience the horror of the crucifixion in a peaceful state. I think I've sometimes imagined that Jesus is almost happy during his crucifixion.

But that isn't the case at all. He didn't ascend above all this pain. Jesus wasn't OK on the cross. He wasn't in a good place mentally. He was in such extreme emotional anguish that his body began sweating blood. He wasn't in a good place physically. He was tortured and went through severe pain. Jesus didn't take Yoda's advice. He didn't let go and act as if the cross didn't bother him. He cried aloud. He admitted that this hurt.

Jesus didn't ascend above the pain, but he also didn't avoid it. The gospel of Mark records the soldiers offered Jesus an anesthetic drink that would have helped dull some of the pain, but Jesus refused. We know that even up to the last moment, Jesus had it within his power to come down off the cross. He could have called his angels. He could have avoided this pain, but he made the choice in the garden of Gethsemane to face it. To head right into it.

To be honest, it feels strange to talk about this in our comfortable room while we sit and listen. In studying for these messages, there were several times I sat down to study the details of the horror and pain of the crucifixion and as I did so, I had a Starbucks coffee and croissant next to me. Something is wrong with that. And yet, what is the right response? Sometimes people have inflicted pain on

themselves as a way to respond. But that's not the point. We don't need to go looking for pain to connect with Jesus.

However, the example of Jesus helps us to understand how to handle the pain that we will inevitably have. The first thing we can learn from watching Jesus is that it's OK to suffer. It's OK to be in pain. It's OK to hate it. We don't have to pretend like we aren't bothered by anything. You've heard people say, "Don't sweat the small stuff ... and it's all small stuff." That's not actually true. There is some very big stuff out there worth sweating. Watching Jesus on the cross gives us the freedom to admit that. We can suffer.

I think that most of us are really uncomfortable with the idea that Jesus suffered. We don't like the idea that Jesus suffered, because it means that we might have to suffer. When hard things happen to me, I'm always surprised. Without realizing it, I think of my life like a movie and I'm the main character. Bullets are flying everywhere. Other people might get hurt or even die. But I'm the main character here. Nothing can touch me.

Then I see Jesus on the cross and I realize that if Jesus can suffer and die, then I can too. God might ask me to face some really difficult things in life. He will be there with me, but they will be painful. As hard as it is to admit it, I'm not the main character in this story.

What this means then is that I can suffer. I can be honest about it. I can admit to others that I'm suffering. I can ask for help. I can ask God where he's gone and why he would let me experience this. I can be angry at God. I can ask tough questions. There's nothing wrong with yelling at God. It's when you stop yelling that something is wrong. As I watch Jesus on the cross, I realize that I can and will suffer.

I can also let other people suffer. Have you ever been going through something really difficult and you've told a Christian friend about it and it's made them really uncomfortable. Sometimes they try to tell you that what you're experiencing really isn't that bad. Or they try to tell you that you just need to know that "All things work together for good." Or they say that you've had your time to suffer, now you need to get over it.

Sometimes it seems like feeling pain isn't spiritually mature. That if we were really spiritual, we'd rise above our pain. That's Yoda talking, not Jesus.

This was actually one of the first heresies that the early church had to deal with. They were just as uncomfortable as we are with the idea that Jesus actually suffered. So a

bunch of people got together and decided that he didn't really suffer physical pain at all. They said his pain was only apparent. He only seemed to be suffering. He didn't really feel pain. This line of thinking was called "Docetism."

And it was quickly identified as heresy. It's false and it's dangerous, but I think some of us believe it without realizing it. We think that Jesus rose above the pain and it didn't really bother him. That makes us think that we can or should rise above pain as well and that suffering is immature, but Jesus suffered for real. That means that we can suffer for real and we can let other people suffer.

So far, this isn't the most encouraging message and if we ended here then we'd be in a lot of trouble, but this isn't all. Even as we go deep into the mystery of the cross, we know that there is something beyond the cross. That's what we'll look at now.

Hope

We've spent some time considering the physical pain that Jesus endured at the cross. But Jesus asked God how he could possibly let this happen. When people who believe in God go through pain, we face a double problem. First, there's the pain we're feeling. But there's also what that pain implies. Where has God gone? Has he forgotten me? Is he angry at me? Did I do something wrong? Or is he even real?

Jesus doesn't say, "My God, my God, it hurts so much." He says, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Up to this point, we may have thought that there was going to be some last minute miracle. That somehow Jesus would be saved from the cross. We may remember how God didn't let Abraham follow through with killing his own son. Maybe God will do something like that here, but God doesn't and Jesus doesn't call in his angels. Jesus is actually going to die. So Jesus asks the question that we are all wondering. God, how could you let this happen? Where have you gone?

This is one of the most common reasons that people don't believe in the Christian God. "I just can't believe that a loving God would allow all of these terrible things to happen in the world." For a lot of people, it's easier to believe that this answer has no question. The God that people want to believe in wouldn't let bad things happen. So when they do happen, they chose to not believe. It's less painful to just deal with the pain, rather than facing pain and a difficult question.

But Jesus doesn't go there because he knows God is there. He just wants to know why he had to be abandoned. So if we're going to make sense of these words of Jesus from the cross, we have to have an answer to this question. We have to know why God abandoned Jesus. Why would he do something like this to a Son that he loves?

We have to assume that Jesus was really asking this question. We have to assume that some part of Jesus really didn't know why God had left him. If he really knew the answer and was just asking the question for dramatic purposes, it would empty the statement of all its meaning and make Jesus into an actor on a stage. Jesus is actually asking God "Why?"

But the words that he uses to ask God why are familiar words. They aren't chosen at random. It's a quote from the first verse of Psalm 22. As many of the Psalms do, this Psalm tells a story. It starts with the psalmist asking about the abandonment of God. But as the psalm progresses, he receives an answer. By the end of the Psalm, he has reaffirmed his faith in God. Psalm 22:24 says this, "For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help."

Jesus knew that the end of the Psalm ended with an answer to the question. He was really asking the question, but he was asking it as a way of insisting that God must actually have an answer. You've had an answer in the past. I'm sure you have a good reason now. Even as Jesus asks this question, he knows there is some kind of an answer.

So our first example to follow is simple: Jesus really suffered, so we should expect to suffer to. Now we realize that embedded in his honesty about his suffering is a subtle kind of hope. It doesn't take away the suffering, but it adds something to it. We suffer, but not like the world suffers. Our suffering is different. We can suffer in hope. We can hope.

Jesus had hope that there was an answer to his question. As we suffer, we can have hope that there is an answer to our questions as well. It turns out that the answer to Jesus's question is the same as the answer to the question that we ask when we go through hard things.

First of all, Jesus's pain makes a statement. Jesus's pain expresses the love of God for us. At the cross, Jesus proved his obedience to the Father—this was nothing short of perfect obedience. At the cross, God proved his love for us—nothing short of perfect love.

Imagine that I walk up to you and say "I love you." You are flattered, but skeptical. You say "Prove it. Prove your love for me." What options do I have? How can I prove my love for you? I could buy you something really nice. I could tell you how nice you look. I could do something really nice for you. Basically, there is only one way that I can prove my love for you. I can do something that costs me but benefits you. I can endure some measure of suffering; whether it is financial suffering, physical suffering, or emotional suffering. But just enduring suffering doesn't really matter unless it helps you.

The best way that I can demonstrate my love for you is to suffer for your pleasure. So when I buy you something, I suffer the loss of money so that you can have something. When I come mow your lawn, I suffer the loss of my time and energy so that your lawn can look nice. I can prove my love for you by sacrificing something for your sake.

Incidentally, this isn't what most people mean when they say "I love you." When most people say that, they basically mean the opposite. They mean that being around you fills me with pleasure. You make me happy. You complete me. You do something for me. But what God means when he says "I love you" is not that we make God happy, but that he is willing to suffer to make us happy.

The answer to this question has to do with us. His suffering demonstrated his love for us. But we still don't have the full answer because we don't understand what his suffering means. Sitting on a chair of nails doesn't demonstrate my love for you because it doesn't do you any good. How does Jesus being forsaken do us any good?

It does us good because when Jesus suffered pain and death at the cross, he didn't just succumb to death. He defeated death. His resurrection demonstrated that he defeated death once for all, but even when he died, it was clear that something on a huge scale had just happened.

Matthew says that when Jesus died, darkness covered the land, the curtain of the temple was torn in two and the earth shook. That's because something cataclysmic happened when God died. What was happening is that pain itself was being destroyed. When God died, death died. God did what no man has ever been able to do. He killed death itself.

The pain that Jesus experienced was so that pain could be no more. It was the beginning of the end, or the end of the beginning. It was the first act that led to the eventual renewal of the whole earth. This was the act that makes it possible for John to say in Revelation 21:4, "There will

be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

This is the beginning of the old order of things passing away. This death, this pain, this suffering is bringing in something new. This pain is so that pain itself might be done away with. It’s not just physical pain that will be destroyed. It’s all that physical pain signifies.

The first thing we learned from Jesus today was that we can and will really suffer pain, but we don’t suffer as the rest of the world suffers. If suffering were all there were, then Yoda might be right. The best thing to do is to rise above it; let go of everything that we care about, but suffering isn’t all there is. For us who believe in Christ, there is something on the other side of our suffering. It is a time where pain is no more.

So when we go through difficult things, when we experience pain, we suffer, but we suffer with hope. It really is suffering. We can quote the first part of Psalm 22 and we can really ask the question, “God where are you in all this?” We can hope that there will be a time when we can quote the end of this psalm and declare God’s goodness. That time may not come before we die, but it will come. We suffer, but not as the world suffers. We suffer in hope.

Conclusion

Yoda is wrong. Or maybe it’s better to say, “Yoda wrong is.” I’m sorry to be the one to break it to you, but Yoda got it wrong. Death is not a natural part of life. It’s exactly the opposite. Death was never meant to be. Pain was never meant to be. All of this is an intrusion into our lives. We weren’t meant to hurt. We weren’t meant to die. We weren’t meant to feel forsaken by God.

The author of Hebrews uses the same word that Jesus used when he declares in Hebrews 13:5, “God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’”

We will not be forsaken, but we might feel like it. We will go through pain and unless Jesus returns first, we will face death. We can’t rise above it and pretend like it doesn’t bother us. Jesus doesn’t choose that route. In the fullness of being human, he suffers. That gives us the freedom to suffer. We can suffer.

But precisely because Jesus suffered, we suffer in a different way. We suffer with hope. It may sometimes be a dim hope, sometimes we may need others to hope for us, but in our suffering we do have hope. We have hope because we know that God loves us. He loves us enough to experience all this pain on our behalf and we have hope because we know that pain will come to an end. Not just our pain, but all pain will be brought to an end. The time is coming when pain will be no more.

Don’t avoid your pain at all costs. Don’t try to ascend above it. Suffer. Go through your pain and suffer in hope as Jesus did. Together, we’ll find on the other side what Jesus found on the other side of his pain: we will be with our Father forever.

NOTES

Pierre Barbet, *A Doctor at Calvary* (New York: Image Books, 1963).

Frederick T. Zugibe, M.D., PH.D., *The Crucifixion of Jesus, A Forensic Inquiry* (New York: M. Evans and Company Inc., 2005).