

## Why Good Friday is Good

In this time and moment of history, we find ourselves deeply concerned with contagion and infection. However, there is a greater evil than any disease. Sin is contagious and sin is infectious. It is worse than any possible disease. It will kill you. Why do I say that? Consider what happens in an environment that is toxic. What happens in an environment where people reject God's command that all people should love him first and foremost and that all people should love their neighbor as themselves? Should you find yourself in a situation where those around you are doing what is wrong, how long can you personally stay strong before you start acting out your own version of the wrong, even if just in reaction? How long before your justifications, your defensiveness, and your desire to be right shows itself? How long before your hurts and your wounds lead you to hurt others? How long before your fears and your anxieties lead you to treat others in a selfish and destructive manner? How long before you begin to act in ways that you would not like to see in others? Sin is ravaging the world. It is ravaging me. It is ravaging you. This world is full of the deathly effects of sin. The ancient wisdom of the Bible has long taught this: "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death." (Proverbs 14:12) "The wages of sin is death." (Romans 6:23a) In fact, the Bible teaches that even humanity's relationship with the rest of nature is broken precisely as a result of the first sin, when Adam disobeyed God; "cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life." (Genesis 3:17) As part of the curse of sin, humanity's relationship with God's good earth is broken, and disease and sickness is part of the outworking of that curse. Sin is, indeed, more contagious, more infectious, and more deadly, than any other scourge.

Some would say that sin, evil, and suffering are an illusion. Some religious traditions say that explicitly; some philosophies such as postmodernism say that implicitly. I believe that calling sin and evil illusory amounts to a denial of reality. Others try to make the biological theory of evolution carry a weight under which that theory bends and breaks. They say that all we are is senseless, random, meaningless atoms bumping around each other in the world. This is, in a very real sense, another denial of reality. Humanity KNOWS that there is a moral right and a moral wrong. Further, we know that there are at least some things that are always right and always wrong. Abuse of children is wrong. First degree murder is wrong. To believe otherwise, as the postmodern philosophers do, is to condemn a culture to a world of increasing tribalism and groups that are simply exercising a Nietzschean "will to power." This is the path of oppression and injustice, and it is a morally reprehensible path. Further, not only do we know that morality is real; we KNOW that suffering is to be lamented. Other traditions cannot explain this lament. If it is all illusion, or if it is all meaningless, whence comes the human longing for lament? Further if all these are simply accidents of evolution, then none may logically say that lament and morality ought to be so. However, the human heart longs for both these things in the face of evil. Where does this come from? It is only the existence of the One, Personal, Moral God, as believed in the Christian tradition, which grounds and explains the human sense of lament and morality. The bible tells us that God made all humanity in his image. Although there is sin in the world, we nonetheless cannot escape that we are made in God's image. Reflecting the clear teaching of God's word, I would remind you that sin and evil are real, repugnant, and to be lamented.

Why? Why are we all impacted in this manner? Why can't medicine, science, the human quest for knowledge, the human drive to know and to live what is good, the human longing for the good life, overcome this sin? Why can't humans look within to solve this problem? Why can't we just change a culture, change a system, and change an environment? Why does politics never work? Why does religious effort fall flat? Why, in times of crisis, do people find themselves, again and again, being ensnared by addictions? Why do the best intellects fail to come up with a solution? Why can't the most down-to-earth person live free of the failure to love God and love neighbor truly? Why does sin keep cropping up, all over the world, in every culture, in every time, and in every place? Why can we not overcome this evil in the world? Commodore Oliver Perry in the war of "War of 1812" famously said: "We have met the enemy and they are ours". Why is the enemy most decidedly NOT "ours." Why, instead, do we find ourselves owned by sin? Why do we find ourselves enthralled, enslaved, captivated, and captive, by and to our selfish and self-centered desires?

The comic Pogo spoke the truth in flipping Commodore Perry's statement on its head: "We have met the enemy, and he is us." Why can sin not be stamped out? Because sin is not first and foremost in the culture or the world, out there! Rather, it is in us. It is in me! I respond sinfully, not because of a sinful environment, no matter how much that environment impacts me. I respond sinfully, because I am a sinner. Sin, at its root, is a rejection of God's goodness and God's ways. We are all born that way. The Bible tells us "None is righteous, no, not one...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:10, 23) The reason why we cannot stamp out this scourge is that it is part of us. Even if asymptomatic for a time, the sin within each person will eventually come out. Do you doubt this? Consider your words. Who has, with his tone of speech and subject matter, treated others with all dignity and respect in his speech at all times? Can you truly say that you have never failed to use speech in a morally perfect way? I certainly can't! Jesus, reflecting many Scriptures, teaches "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." (Matthew 12:34) Jesus goes further: "From within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these things come from within, and they defile a person." (Mark 7:21-23) Let me be clear; if you disagree that all people's hearts are naturally evil, you do not *really* disagree with me: you disagree with Jesus.

Some would say that this kind of language is harsh. I do not wish to be harsh; I wish to be truthful. I am interested in the truth. Suppose you had a brain tumor and didn't know it. Suppose the brain tumor was causing headaches. You went to the doctor to complain about the persistent headaches. Which would you rather have: a doctor that accurately and truthfully diagnoses that a brain tumor is causing your headaches and immediately prescribes the appropriate treatment; a doctor who inaccurately and sincerely diagnoses that a sinus infection is causing your headaches and prescribes a decongestant; or a doctor who accurately recognizes the truth of the brain tumor but does not want to be mean so tells you that you have sinus headaches and then prescribes decongestants. I would choose the doctor who tells the truth. What about you? I'm not interested in beliefs, myths, theories, legends, illusions, or delusions. I want to live my life – all of it – based on the truth. Although I do not presume, as many intellectuals in the Enlightenment did, that I or any humanity can have a complete grasp on the truth, I do want to know things that are true! I want to know the truth about myself, humanity, the world, and God. In God's word, revealed in our human history, I have found such truth. And in knowing the truth, I have been set free. Such as I have found and come to believe, I proclaim to you.

What hope is there for you, what hope is there for me, and what hope is there for the world? How has the truth freed me? The Lord Jesus did not shelter at home in the heavens, allowing the ravages and contagion of sin to spread in an exponentially upward curve that would destroy the world in weeks. Rather, and true of all people, whether they believe in God or not, God's Spirit currently restrains the evil of our world by his common grace, so that none are as evil, in this present time, as we could become. Many people mistakenly trust in the "goodness of man." What makes this world beautiful is the goodness of God. While God does restrain sin, this does not mean we are rescued from it. Where then, does our home come from?

Our hope starts with the message of Christmas, that God walked among us. Jesus – the second person of the unity of God – became a true man while only shedding the glory –but not the essence - of his divinity. He entered our contagious and infectious world. He did not stay away; he drew near. He drew near and breathed deeply of the world, seeing all its beauty and experiencing all its hurts. His lung drew in all of what it means to be human. He faced- again and again- the temptation to become like those whom he was with. He came to be the friend of sinners, as the religious establishment of his day mockingly called him. Although he has drawn near, and although he was impacted at every level of personhood by living in a sin-filled world, he himself did not sin. He loved his Father with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. He loved his neighbor as himself. He followed the will of His father. In other words, although living in a world of death, he did not deserve to die.

Our hope climaxes in the middle of Jesus' life, rather, the end of it, when he was in his mid-30's, on that first "Good Friday." It was a day of betrayal, denial, oppression, mocking, injustice, torture, gossip, jeering, shame, abandonment, loneliness, agony, suffering and death. Jesus followers betrayed and denied him. The religious establishment oppressed, mocked, and scorned him. The government powers allowed injustice, torture, and wrongful death. The crowds gossiped, jeered, and shamed. Jesus was nailed to the cross, although he had done no sin, and he found himself shamed, suffering, lonely, in agony, and dying. In his agony, Jesus experienced the wrath of God against sin. This is why, on the cross, Jesus cried out; "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The wages of sin is death; Jesus, who never sinned, tasted those wages. How in the world could this be our hope?

The prophet Isaiah explains how this is our hope. In writing of God's perfect servant – clearly not the nation of Israel, as the Old Testament makes clear – Isaiah writes; "surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows." (Isa 53:4) "He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed." (Isa 53:5). I could go on, quoting verse after verse from this one chapter, demonstrating that although he had done no evil, he suffered on behalf of others. How is this our hope? Isaiah tells us; "his soul makes an offering for sin." (Isa 53:10). In other words, in keeping with the law God gave to Moses, Jesus was our substitute. Jesus did not need to die for his own sin, because he had none. He died for my sin. He died for the sin of all who look to him. He died in my place. In speaking of the will of the Father and the fate of Jesus, the Bible tells us: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5:21) And Jesus did this willingly, as an adult, of age. He went freely. He gave himself. It was no mistake. He did not resist. There was no cosmic child abuse; there was a courageous and loving person, Jesus, who willingly sacrificed himself to save those whom he loved. He was forsaken by his Father, so that he and the Father could promise to those who trust him; "I will never leave you nor forsake you." (Heb 13:5) And make no mistake, Jesus

did this for love's sake. And the proof that he was heard, that his self-sacrifice was pleasing to God, is seen in the fact that he physically, bodily, really rose from the grave three days later. Even now Jesus lives, seated at the right hand of God the Father. The Scriptures celebrate this; "Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." (Hebrews 7:25) I will have more to say about Jesus' resurrection on Easter Sunday.

This, then, is why "Good" Friday is good. It means hope for the world; Jesus said; "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16). This is not fable, myth, or legend. God has acted, in our history, through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. I believe this. Do you believe? If you have believed, praise God for his gracious gift to you! Although I am not now perfect, I know that I am clean. How do I know? Because Jesus tells me he has made me clean. Christian, although you are not now perfect in your actions, God views you as blameless because he sees Jesus' beauty in you. This is grace. This is good news!

If you have not believed, if you are not a Christian, hear the words of Jesus. Jesus says: "whoever comes to me I will never cast out." (John 6:37) Jesus invites every person living to find forgiveness of sin in him. He promises to make you clean. More than that, he promises to give you his Spirit! Do not go the way that is right in your eyes. Know the truth. Put your hope and trust in Christ today! You may do so now, by simply calling out to him. You may say; "Lord Jesus, have mercy on me, a sinner!" That is a prayer, when prayed sincerely, that Jesus always hears and answers. Trust him today. He will give you new life. The bible tells us that today is the day of salvation. Turn to Jesus today. Jesus himself warns more than any other person in the bible that there is a day of worldwide judgment coming. The only hope for anyone in that day is the hope found in trusting in Christ. If you have trusted him today, or if you simply want to talk further about these things, please feel free to contact me. May God bless you all!

Father, may you shine your light of truth in a world in desperate need of the light and of the truth. Thank you for sending Jesus, the light of the world. That you that he has saved all who trust in him. May everyone who hear my voice or reads these words know the peace that Christ offers to all who would turn to him! In Jesus' name, Amen!