

“And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”

“When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!”

Dear friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed;

Another Good Friday. A very different Good Friday. While more than a few of our observances of this day may be dark and overcast, reminding us of the mood of that day on which the Saviour died, this one, with the dark shadow that seems to surround our world at the moment, may help us understand in a different the events of this day. We should see all of our lives in view of this high point, this turning point in human history. This day marks the beginning of the end of God's plan to save the world from its sin.

The church has many words to describe the events of this day and their meaning for our lives. We speak of *redemption*, referring to Christ's buying us back for God from our slavery to sin and death. We speak of *atonement*, of how Christ makes us “at one with God”. We speak of Christ being the *propitiation* for our sins, meaning He is the covering for our sins that blots them out before God. Each one of these words describes a certain aspect and importance that the sacrificial death of Christ has for us, and it is good for us to learn and understand what they mean. But we can also teach the importance of this day with some of the simplest words in the English language—the words ‘if’ and ‘because’. May God’s word touch our hearts through those two simple words today, that we may gain an ever greater appreciation of all Christ has done for us that we might be forgiven and live eternally as the redeemed children of God.

Think for a moment of what life would be like **if** there were no Good Friday. **If** it were not for the events of this day, then life in this world would be the greatest tragedy we could imagine. All too often, people simply think you live, you die and that's that. But the truth is that without this day, death would not be the end—the worst would be yet to come. God, the all holy, righteous Lord of heaven and earth has declared in His righteousness that sin must be dealt with and punished, and as a result of His righteous judgments, all sinners deserve the torments of eternal death in hell. The truly sad part of that fair and righteous judgment is that each and every one of us is a sinner, condemned by our own unbelief, and deserving of death.

Or what **if** Jesus had felt compelled to respond to the crowds on Golgotha that day who mocked Him: *“You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”* Time after time, Jesus had shown that He was the Messiah, the One who had come to fulfill all the promises and prophecies God had given His people. And yet people would not believe. Like so many people of our day, they had their own idea of what would constitute definitive proof. Do You want us to believe in You, Jesus? Then do the impossible! Come down from that cross, and **if** you can do that, then maybe we'll believe that You truly are God's Son. But you can't do it, can you, Jesus? You're not so special now. You're no Saviour, you're just another misguided, religious fanatic, paying for your arrogance. But Jesus could have come down from the cross. He did not have to die for the sins of the whole world. He did not have to take our place on that cross. He was not dying because of any sin He had committed. What *if* Jesus had decided to prove to those taunting crowds just how easily He could save Himself. What if He had chosen to come down from the cross instead of being the sacrifice that would save the world?

All the ifs we can mention in regard to this day would make a difference—but it would mostly be a negative difference. May we never forget that **if** it weren't for the events we remember this day, there could be no forgiveness for us. **If** Christ had not died for our sins, suffering in our place, there would be no peace between the Holy Lord of All and sinful people like you and me. One of the hymn writers said: *“If Your beloved Son, O God, had not to earth descended; and in our mortal flesh and blood had not sin's power ended; then this poor, wretched soul of mine, in hell eternally would pine, because of my transgressions.”* (LSB 568, st. 1)

But this is where the **because** of Good Friday comes in. Jesus does not die for Himself, but He dies **because** of His love for lost mankind—for the people who would never know forgiveness and life apart from His holy sacrifice for us. He does not come down from the cross to save Himself **because** He loves us and does not want us to suffer in hell for all eternity. He does not try to prove Himself to the crowds, **because** He is God and what matters most is not proving that fact to unbelievers; what matters is being the God of help and salvation for those who need Him, including those people on Golgotha that day. He dies, **because** in the all-knowing, holy and perfect wisdom of God, this is the only way that you and I can be saved. And it is **because** of His loving, forgiving, sacrificial death that we can say with that Roman centurion at the foot of the cross: *“Truly this was the Son of God!”*

If Jesus does not defeat sin, death and the devil for us, then we would never know joy and peace. We would never truly have hope for the future. We would still be the enemies of God **because** of our sin. But **because** of this day we have hope: a living, certain and sure hope given us in the promises of God. We have hope **because** Jesus Christ, God Himself in human flesh, has given His life in our place, to fully cover the sins that deserve God's judgment. We have the assurance of God's love and care for each and every moment of our lives, for as St. Paul reminds us: *“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”* (Romans 8:32, ESV) And **because** the same Lord who dies for us also rose again for us, we have the sure and certain hope of life forever with God in the glories of heaven.

The people on Golgotha that afternoon apparently did not comprehend the eternal significance of the events taking place around them, even though they should have understood what was happening because of God's word in the Scriptures. But through faith, we have come to know and believe all that God has done for us through the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. **If** Christ had not lived for us, died for us, and destroyed death and hell for us by rising again from the dead, then this life would be one of sorrow and pain that would only give a foretaste of the greater sorrow of hell. If God's love were not active in our world, then the reality of COVID-19 and war and crime and hatred and all manners of evil would be unchecked and would bring greater suffering than we can now imagine. But **because** Christ was willing to give Himself in our place we, who were once condemned sinners, are now the children of God. We, who were once dead in trespasses and sins are made alive **because** Christ died and rose again for us. And **because** we are the redeemed children of God, our lives are changed forever. Sin is no longer our master. Death is no longer the end. Hell is not our fate. We live in the love, peace and joy of Him who has set us free. We live in Him, giving thanks and praise for His love and mercy.

I wonder, in the midst of the starkness and quiet of this day if we would like to ignore the events of this day, to pretend that they did not happen. We don't like to think of the sorrow, the suffering, the pain and death our dear Lord had to endure because of us, because of our sinfulness. But **if** this day did not happen, there would be no forgiveness for us. But it did happen, and **because** Christ has paid the price for our sins, we come with humble, thankful hearts, giving thanks and praise to God for His love for poor, miserable sinners like you and me. Amen.