

What Really Happened on Calvary

"Today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).

In evangelical churches everywhere, every Good Friday and probably most Sundays the cross of Christ is proclaimed. The Gospel of the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life for those who trust what Christ accomplished for us on the cross is clearly (and correctly) preached. But is that all that happened on Calvary? I argue here that we're missing something that's essential, that's central to the Gospel. Our focus in today's evangelical Christianity is on knowing that our sins are forgiven and, with that, we have the gift of being in heaven when we die. That, however, is a severely truncated Gospel. It's not the full Gospel, it's not the true Gospel. Let's discuss this very important matter.

In the text of the New Testament, "angels" appears more often than "love" or "sin." Yes, we know about angels. But we don't see them, so we don't think much about them. There are very many angels, and very many demons. They surround us. But because they're invisible to us, their work is secret, mysterious. There's a spirit world parallel to or embedded in our physical world. And that spirit world is real and exceedingly powerful. The angels mainly serve God communicating to us and helping us, though we're oblivious to their ministry. The demons mainly serve Satan in maintaining the human race disobedient to God, in rebellion to our Creator, and therefore deserving of condemnation.

Wickedness erupted in the spirit world at some point right around the time of creation, exactly when doesn't matter. Evil is not an abstraction. It's a very real entity, embodied in living created beings, whether they're spirit beings or humans. Sin is but one expression of evil. Evil is everything that opposes or in one way or another refuses to honor God. It's rebellion against the One who created living beings. It's hatred of the One who loves. It's repudiation of the One who is truth. It's doing the very opposite of what the One who is good does. When the Serpent entered the Garden and enticed that first couple to disobey God's word, that wicked world of spirit beings commandeered control of the morality of humanity. As a result, since that moment, God's beloved humans necessarily serve Satan and his massive army of demons. Evil is a force within God's creation that must be justly dealt with and disposed of.

What happened in the Garden was a test. God gave us a measure of moral freedom so that we can make real choices, and He holds us accountable for the choices we make. That first couple was commanded to obey God's will, that is, His word, because if they didn't they would be yielding to evil and as a result suffer death. If they obeyed, they would be doing good, and would experience blessing and life. Later in time, when Israel was delivered from Egypt and taken to be God's own people, the very same choice was placed before them (Deuteronomy 30:15ff). They could obey God, which means love, serve, and trust God, and be loyal to God. And so experience life and blessing with God present among them, in their midst. Or be disobedient, disloyal, and refuse to serve Him, thereby doing evil and suffering curses and death as a consequence. The invisible world of Satan and his demons did everything in their power to cause the Nation of Israel to choose the latter. Israel repeated the failure of the Garden. In discipline, God cast them from His presence into Exile, to be with pagan Gentiles and their gods.

In the Gospels, we see that Jesus was the personal embodiment of Israel. His life recapitulated the history of the Nation of Israel. Reprising what the Serpent did in the Garden, Satan tested Him also. But Jesus, relying on the authority of God's Word, obeyed Scripture, revealing love for and trust in God. Jesus thus showed up Satan as one who refused to honor God's Word. So Satan waited for another more opportune time: Calvary. Before we look at that event, though, there's another thread we need to examine.

In Genesis 11, at the Tower of Babel episode, God gave a rebellious humanity over to be ruled by wicked spirit beings ("gods") who themselves evidently were under the dominion of Satan. All the Gentile nations were thus ruled by wicked beings. Only Israel, when it came into existence later in time, was ruled by the Creator God Himself, Jehovah. When David was king, there was a corporate unity between the people and David. The King represented God's will to the people, and obeying the king was obedience to God. When Jesus came, offering Himself as King and Messiah, Jews were invited to ally themselves with Him. That was the ministry of John the Baptist. There was to be a corporate unity between the people and their Messiah/King. That unity between Jesus and His disciples is explicit in the Upper Room Discourse in the Gospel of John. There are only two possibilities in Scripture: we are one with Jesus, or one with Satan. By preaching the Gospel to Gentiles, they are invited to ally themselves with the Jewish King/Messiah. If they don't, they remain allied with Satan. Old Testament saints were made one with us with Jesus (Hebrews 11:40); God did that retrospectively. In the future, at the end of time, all people will be divided into two categories: those who are with Jesus, and those who are with Satan (Revelation 20 and 21). Those with Satan will spend eternity with Satan in hell. Those with Jesus will spend eternity with Him in the presence of God. So, *who are we with?*

There's much mystery associated with the crucifixion of Jesus. We're not told in Scripture all we'd like to know about the full meaning of it. In a few places, though, we read that the Son came to earth in human form so that **"by His death He might destroy him who holds the power of death, that is, the devil"** (Hebrews 2:14; see also John 12:31, Colossians 2:15, and 1 John 3:8). In transcendent love and in perfect justice, God had to deal with sin, making forgiveness of sin possible. But God was doing much more than that. He was dealing with all evil.

By having Jesus crucified, it seems that Satan had hoped there would be no Kingdom, and he'd thus be able to have dominion over all humanity forever. But what was happening instead was God was demonstrating to Satan – indeed to the entire invisible spirit world, that there is One who obeys God even to the point of suffering humiliation and agonizing death: Jesus, the King/Messiah. Jesus is humble and fully submitted to the will of God. Jesus is loyal to God regardless what personal sacrifice it involves. Jesus honors the Father even if he must die to do it. Jesus reveals by personal sacrifice on behalf of others the unique kind of love that God has for humanity. Jesus loves life so much that He wants others to have it regardless what it costs Him. And, by upholding the authority of Scripture, Jesus loves truth. In all these ways, Jesus showed up Satan for what he is, a usurper, liar, murderer and rebel, deserving of death. And then the resurrection, which Satan evidently never anticipated, gave the full victory to Jesus and procured Satan's total defeat. God couldn't have simply annihilated Satan when He initially rebelled, because that would be an act of willfulness and forcefulness – the very means Satan uses to do evil. God had to do it this way.

Now, when Jesus was on the cross, there were two others also being crucified on Calvary. The episode is recorded in Luke 23:39-43. These verses aren't the Gospel; they vividly, dramatically illustrate the binary nature of the cross. Depending on how we respond to Jesus, He offers either salvation or judgment. These two were rebels against Roman rule (they weren't "thieves"). One mocked Jesus, to his eternal tragic loss. Let's think about the other. He said, "Don't you fear God?" implying that he did. He was probably scared about having to face God. "But this man has done nothing wrong," he added. So he knew Jesus! In fact, probably everyone in Judea knew about Jesus. It was common knowledge that it was time for a messiah to come, all knew John the Baptist's preaching that the kingdom was imminent, and all knew about the miracles Jesus was performing over the previous 3 years. This man says further, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." So he was aware that Jesus was the king promised in Scripture, and more, he believed in resurrection! How else would someone who's dead on a cross subsequently establish a kingdom? And even further, by asking to be remembered, he's pleading for a personal relationship with Jesus the King. How else would he hope to be in the Kingdom? This man is expressing biblical faith in the Person of Jesus.

Jesus' reply is exceedingly important. He says, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." Almost everyone who reads this focuses on the "in paradise." And they substitute heaven for "paradise." Wrong. Paradise was the place in *sheol* for the righteous dead. Jesus was imputing righteousness to this rebellious sinner! But of far greater importance in Jesus' reply is the "with me." That's the whole point of this episode. That's the whole message of all Scripture. That's the great cosmic choice we hopefully all will make, to be with Jesus.

What's happening here on Calvary, in these few verses, is this: Deuteronomy 30 is being established as the foundation for understanding the cross. We all must choose, life or death, good or evil, wisdom or folly, blessing or curse. And it's all on the basis now, since Calvary, of, Who do we want to be with? Who do we want a relationship with? There are only two choices. That first man, foolishly rejecting Jesus, by default chose Satan. The second man knowingly, wisely chose Jesus. And Jesus took him into a personal relationship with Himself. That is salvation.

Paul often uses the expression, "in Christ." It's a *relational* term. Other exclusively relational terms in the N.T. are "Bride of Christ," "adoption," and "reconciliation." How do we miss it? Perhaps because we want to, because a relationship always involves responsibilities and our sin nature abhors even that very thought. We err in supposing we can safely ignore obedience to Christ's teachings and commands because we have forgiveness of sins and the assurance of eternal life. I suspect that at a popular level this self-deception prevails in the Church.

The forgiveness of sins is something a holy God had to do to make it possible for sinful people to be with Him. God's love and justice demanded that. The defeat of Satan, indeed of all evil, is there too, as demonstrated above. But let's not miss the greater lesson at Calvary, that what's on offer is a Person. Salvation is being in personal relationship with the living Jewish Messiah/King, the Son incarnate. To be with Jesus is life. To be with Jesus is blessing. It's the greatest good that there is. I hope your concept of salvation isn't just having sins forgiven and a promise of eternal life, because if that's the case, you've missed it. The essence of the Gospel is being in loving, personal, intimate relationship with the resurrected, living Jesus. Jesus is the most wonderful Person in all existence, and there's nothing greater than to be with Him forever.