**Matthew Week 21 Dan Hamel**

**Matthew 26-27 April 13, 2025**

We’re excited about Easter next weekend! Please think about who you can invite! Last year, some very good friends of our family invited their sister, who was not a Christian, but who had been going through a difficult season. The sister was grateful for the invitation, and not only came with them, but responded to the message, decided to become a Christian, and was baptized. Her entire life is different, and the turning point of her eternity was an invitation from a family member. Please think and pray about who you can invite next weekend.

We are coming to the end of the gospel of Matthew. This is perhaps the most sacred space in all of Scripture, telling the story of the final twenty-four hours of Jesus’ life, which began at sundown on Thursday night as Jesus ate his final meal with his friends.

**Scene One: The Last Supper**

Jesus was with his disciples for a meal which we know as “the Last Supper.” It wasn’t just any meal—it was the Passover meal. For the last 1,200 years, every Jewish family had eaten the Passover meal in the same way. Families gathered to remember that God delivered his people from bondage and captivity. They had been slaves in Egypt for over 400 years. Then one night God told them to eat a meal with unleavened bread. They would have to be ready to leave in an instant, so there was no time for the bread to rise. The main course was a sacrificial lamb. The blood from the lamb was spread on the door so that God’s judgment would pass over them. They ate this meal every single year, at the same time of the year, for over a millennium.

On the night before Jesus was to die, he gathered his disciples for a Passover meal. And this is fascinating: in all the gospel accounts—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—not one of them mentions the main course. They talk about the bread, they talk about the wine, but no one talks about the lamb. At this Passover meal, the lamb is not *on* the table but sitting *at* the table. Jesus is the new lamb who delivers us from bondage, who saves us from the wrath of God, who symbolically washes our sins away.

Jesus said the most incredible words at this Passover meal:

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (Matthew 26:26-28)

Jesus took this Passover meal that had been observed for over a thousand years, celebrating God’s deliverance and the freedom of God’s people, and he said, “The old Passover meal is going away. I’m giving you a new meal to partake in. Don’t only do it once a year—do it as often as you meet together so that you always remember my sacrifice.” The *annual* meal of remembrance, celebration and gratitude for the Jewish people became a *weekly* meal of remembrance, celebration, and gratitude for everyone who believes in Jesus.

After they finished the meal, they sang a hymn, and then they left the house and walked outside the city gates and down the Kidron Valley to a grove of olive trees known as Gethsemane.

**Scene Two: The Garden**

It was likely a 15–20-minute walk from the house where they had the meal to the garden. It was a solitary place for Jesus to go and pray. [View the online sermon for a photo of what the garden looked like at night.] Jesus told his disciple to stay by themselves and pray, but they were so tired, and they didn’t understand the ramifications of the battle happening in the spiritual realms, so they ended up falling asleep. While they slept, Jesus was by himself, about a stone's throw (maybe 40-50 yards) away, entering the greatest spiritual battle, the most intense emotional struggle, in the history of the world. Listen to how Jesus described what was happening in his interior world: “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Matthew 26:38). Why was he overwhelmed in that way? Jesus knew what the next few hours held—he would be betrayed by a friend, abandoned by his disciples, and undergo the most extreme suffering and physical pain imaginable, leading to his own death. His sorrow and stress were so extreme that he sweated drops of blood. This is a medical condition called “hematidrosis,” in which the capillaries in the forehead rupture under extreme stress and blood flows from unbroken skin. That’s an outward sign of the battle that was raging inside. Jesus began to pray. He “fell with his face to the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will’” (Matthew 26:39).Jesus prayed this prayer not once, not twice, but three times, pleading with the Father to find another way to save the world that didn’t require his suffering and death.

The battle for our salvation was accomplished on the cross and in the empty tomb, but the real war was won here in this garden. The war for our salvation was won with Jesus falling on his face in prayer, completely honest about his personal desire to avoid suffering but resolute in his determination to follow God’s will, not his own. *This is the paradigm for much of the Christian life*. How many times does God call us to take up our cross, die to our personal desires, and follow the difficult road he has set before us? He calls us to tell the truth, even when it is going to be personally costly. He calls us to forgive someone, even when everything within us wants to hold onto anger and seek revenge. He calls us to chastity and purity, even when everyone around us is engaged in hook-up culture. He calls us to generously care for others, even when our natural instincts are clamoring for us to put ourselves first. In the garden Jesus showed us how to wrestle with God, how to be entirely honest about our very understandable human desires, and yet ultimately determine to subordinate our loudest desires to preserve ourselves for our greatest desire to do God’s will.

Amid the turmoil, Judas entered the garden and with him came the Jewish leaders and as many as six hundred Roman soldiers. They stayed at a distance, waiting for Judas to give them the cue to swoop in. One step at a time, Judas made his way over to Jesus. Then he leaned in and betrayed the Son of God with a kiss. He handed over the Messiah for thirty pieces of silver, the going price for a slave. Make no mistake—Jesus could have fought back! This is the man who walked on water, calmed the storm, and raised the dead. He could have said a word and eviscerated his would-be captors. But instead, he went willingly, silently, and alone. All his disciples who said they would die with him end up deserting him. Jesus was led away in chains, and we leave scene two and enter scene three.

**Scene Three: The Trials**

The soldiers bound Jesus and led him back into Jerusalem through the East Gate. It was the middle of the night. The Bible says it was dark, which is describing far more than just the physical reality outside; it’s a portal into the spiritual reality that was at work. “The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward” (Matthew 26:59). They knew they had nothing to pin to Jesus, so they obstructed justice and distorted facts to condemn an innocent man. The man who came from heaven and only spoke the truth was slandered with lie after lie. His accusers violated eleven laws to get the verdict they wanted. The Jewish courts found Jesus guilty and said he was worthy of death, but they didn’t have the authority to execute anyone. They were a religious court; only the Roman officials could order official execution, so they sent Jesus to Pilate, who tried him and sent him to Herod. Herod tried him and sent him back to Pilate. They were using him as a pawn in their own political games.

Pilate’s wife was warned in a dream about Jesus. She told her husband, “Don’t have anything to do with that man.” After talking to Jesus, Pilate saw through the situation. “Pilate knew it was out of self-interest (the Jewish rulers) had handed Jesus over to him” (Matthew 27:18). Pilate had every intention of declaring Jesus innocent and releasing him. But it was his custom every year to honor the Jewish Passover by releasing a prisoner who had been condemned to death. Instead of like a president giving out pardons to people he thinks deserve them, Pilate let the people pick who they were going to pardon. He assumed that because the people adored Jesus so much, they would obviously choose him over the criminal Barabbas. “But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed” (Matthew 27:20). Pilate knew what the Jewish leaders were doing, so he asked, “‘Why? What crime has he committed?’ But they shouted all the louder, ‘Crucify him!’”  (Matthew 27:23).

Pilate could tell an uproar was starting, which meant the Jewish leaders had worked this crowd into a frenzy. If Pilate didn’t give them what they wanted, they were going to riot. Riots not only caused incredible damage to the city, but they were also the number one nuisance the Romans told their local leaders to keep under control. Pilate knew that if he didn’t give the Jews what they wanted, he would have a violent mob on his hands, and he might be punished or demoted by the emperor. So he had a decision to make: do what he knew was right, stand for truth, protect an innocent man, or take the path of least resistance, bend to the mob, and sentence the author of life to death. Of course, we all know what happened. He washed his hands in front of the crowd, and said, “His blood will be on your hands.”

**Scene Four: The Torture**

After Pilate issued his verdict, everyone left the courtroom and the soldiers took Jesus to be flogged. Flogging was an excruciatingly painful method of punishment and torture. It was considered so cruel and unusual that no Roman citizen was allowed to be flogged, no matter how heinous their crime. It was reserved only for foreigners, peasants, and slaves. When someone was flogged, they were stripped completely naked and their hands were tied around a post or a pillar, exposing the back and making the skin and muscles taunt. Then a soldier would stand on each side and they would take turns flogging their victim with an instrument known as a flagellum—a wooden stick about a foot long with numerous ribbons of leather flowing from the top, each embedded with glass and metal hocks and lead balls or sheep bones. The Roman soldier would lay the strands of leather on top of the back, and then rake it across, ripping off the flesh and muscles of the victim. One soldier went one way and the other would checkerboard it in the other direction. They would begin at the shoulders, move down the back, and continue across the buttocks, the thighs and eventually the calves. Roman historians tell us that it was not uncommon for the victims to have their eyes gouged out and their ears ripped off, or even for their spinal column to be severed during the flogging. The beating was so merciless that it wasn’t unusual for the internal organs or intestines to fall out because there was no longer enough flesh and muscles to hold them in. The torture was so horrific that Tacitus tell us that six out of ten men died during the flogging, before they could face their expected execution. I am not saying this for shock value. This really happened to Jesus; the Prince of Peace was brutalized beyond comprehension.

After the flogging, Jesus was taken to the military barracks where the soldiers continued their torture and humiliation. They put a scarlet robe on him (scarlet was the color that a king would wear). They twisted together a crown of thorns, placed it on his head, and took turns mocking him, kneeling before him, calling him king. They spat on him and hit him in the head with a stick again and again. After they had their fun, they attached a wooden beam to his back. The crossbeams used in crucifixion weighed on average 125 pounds. This was the crossbeam Jesus would eventually be nailed to. He had to carry it himself to the place of execution. He fell repeatedly under its weight, so many times that someone from the crowd was chosen at random and forced to help Jesus along the way. The Jews had a law that no one could be executed within the city walls, so the holy city wouldn’t be defiled. So Jesus was led outside the city down a road now known as the Via Delarosa (*the way of suffering*). This road would lead him to a hill known as Golgotha (*the place of the skull*).

**Scene Five: The Crucifixion**

When Jesus arrived at Golgotha, the cross beam was laid on the ground and attached to a vertical beam of the cross, and Jesus was forced to crawl on top of it. The soldiers nailed Jesus to the plank. Archaeologists have found the skeleton of a man who was crucified, and the nail was left in his body. [View the online sermon to see a replica of the nail.] It’s more like a railroad spike, with a broad head to keep the victim from pulling their hands out through the hole and falling off the cross. They would have driven four nails into Jesus’ body—one through each wrist, which would have severed the median nerve, sending piercing pain up his arms and into his shoulder and back, and one through each of his ankles. Not one on top of the other as in the pictures, but sideways, causing maximum pain and discomfort. With his body fully secured, they lifted the cross, set it in the ground and left Jesus there, in pain greater than any of us can possibly imagine, until all the life drained out of his body. And for what crime? For welcoming children? For healing the crippled? For giving sight to the blind? For embracing lepers? For extending grace and a second chance to prostitutes? For teaching his followers to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them?

As Jesus hung on the cross, those who passed by, those for whom he was suffering, taunted and humiliated him. They were relentlessly cruel, but Jesus, till his last breath, was relentlessly compassionate. Though they were indiscriminate with their brutality, he was indiscriminate with his kindness. Hanging on the cross he cried out, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing” (Luke 23:34). Even to the end, Jesus put others first*.* As NT Wright said, “Jesus was the very embodiment of vulnerable love. He took the worst that can be done, took it from every angle, and gave back only more love.” The most gracious man who ever lived suffered the most gruesome death ever imagined. The ultimate high priest became the ultimate sacrifice.

While he was on the cross, the sky grew dark, like a total eclipse in the middle of the day. It lasted not for three minutes but for three hours. This unexpected and otherwise unexplainable total darkness was written about by ancient historians who were living in other parts of the world. The cosmic sign was a picture of a heavenly reality taking place on the cross. We can’t understand all the physics of it, but somehow, someway, on the cross, Jesus took my sin and your sin in his own body. As he took on our sin, God the Father looked upon him, and allowed his Son to receive the punishment that our sin deserved. Think about it this way: The fitting punishment for every evil action in the history of the world (the punishment for every lie ever told, every robbery every committed, every adultery, every rape, every child molestation, every murder, every war, every genocide, every sin in the history of the world—for your sin and my sin—was unleashed on the Son of God in that moment. The sky turned black, God turned away, and Jesus cried out, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). Then he said, “It is finished.” In English that is three words. In Greek, it was one word: *tetelestai*. This word was stamped across a bill once it was paid off. If you have a mortgage on your house and you pay it off by refinancing, the debt isn’t eliminated; it’s simply transferred. That’s not what Jesus did for us on the cross. Our debt wasn’t transferred. It was paid. It was finished. Gone. Never to be seen again. Hebrews 10:14 says, “For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. When he had completed all that the Father sent him to earth to do, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.”

That’s what happened on the cross. On average, people who were crucified lasted 72 hours on the cross, an excruciating amount of time to suffer. There are stories of people living as long as nine days. Because of the brutality Jesus endured before the cross, he died after six hours, the six most important hours in the history of the world. When we look at Jesus hanging on the cross, drenched in blood and tears, we see that our God died with his arms stretched out wide, as if to say for all of time that this is the posture of God to the world. Not a God with arms crossed in condemnation and judgment, not shaking his finger in indignation and anger, but arms stretched wide, reaching out in constant, unconditional, sacrificial, never-ending love.

It is so important that we hear that today. Not everyone here today feels like they are loved by God. If you were honest, you’d say based upon everything that has been happening in your life that you feel like a failure, or you feel broken, or you feel afraid, or you feel alone. No matter how you might feel in the present moment, the cross has the final word over your life. It declares in a language that is deeper than words, “*You are loved!”* Jesus’ love for you goes deeper than you could ever sink, and it stretches further than you could ever run. His love is consistent; his love is never failing, and unlike most of the love that you will receive in this world, his love truly is unconditional. The crucifixion of Jesus was the all-time high watermark of love on earth. And that’s God’s love for you! It wasn’t the nails that held him to the cross; it was his love for you.

How do you respond to such a gift? I have two suggestions.

**Continually remember Jesus’ sacrifice.** We should continually think back to the price Jesus paid so we could be saved. Most of us know what it is like to lose someone we love, and what it’s like to think about them and remember them. My mom passed away two years ago next month. I think about her every day. I’m so thankful for a mom who gave life to me, who raised me, provided for me, and loved me. I’ve thought about her every day for the last two years. How much more should we think about Jesus, the one who not only gave us life and loved us and provided for us, but who literally died so that we could live. When Paul was speaking to the Corinthians he said, “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). There is something powerful that happens in your life when you take a few minutes every day to stop and think about Jesus on the cross with his body broken, lashes on his back, a crown of thorns on his heads, and a spear wound in his side. Instead of simply listening to him say, “Father, forgive them,” put your name in that place. “Father, forgive Dan.” “Father, forgive Chad.” “Father, forgive Linda.” Hold that in your mind. One of the greatest pathways to enhancing intimacy with Christ and maturity in Christ is remembering the suffering of Christ. The Holy Spirit shows up in a supernatural way as we give our focus to the cross. This is something we do every week during communion. It’s a central part of every worship service we do, but you could incorporate this into every day of your life. Be overwhelmed with the magnitude of it all, be humbled beyond belief, say thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.

**Worshipfully live our lives to honor Jesus.**  Most of us understand the reciprocity of relationships. The other day our family was on a walk. We ran into another family who lives near us who we had not met before. Our kids were similar ages. We introduced ourselves, the kids played. It was a fun ten minutes. The next day, their little girl Noel dropped off a card she made for Addie and told her how nice it was to meet her. What did we tell Addie? Because Noel has done this for you, it would be appropriate for you to do something kind for her. We all intuitively understand that for relationships to be healthy, they require some kind of reciprocity, some kind of exchange. The same is true for Jesus. Romans 12:1 puts it this way: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy (*Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross, leading to our salvation*), to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.” This is the only logical response. Here’s how the Apostle Paul put it in 2 Corinthians 5:15: “Jesus died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” Because he gave his life for you, you should live your life to honor him. We don’t live our lives for him by becoming a nun or a monk and moving to a convent or monastery. It’s not about retreating from the world, but rather deeply engaging in the world, loving people in his name, shining his light, and carrying on his mission of seeing all people everywhere reconciled to the God who made them, loves them, and sent his Son to save them.

As we sit today at the foot of the cross, let’s commit to continually remembering his sacrifice, and courageously living our lives to bring him honor.