

The Centrality of the Cross, Pt. 2—Preparation for Easter
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Wasilla Bible Church
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Larry Kroon: This year I did something I've always wanted to do. I've asked Joel to prepare us for worship next week. I've always wanted to have him take one Sunday to prepare us for the next Sunday's worship, and so I asked him to do that for this Sunday...coming Sunday...to use this Sunday to prepare us for worship next Sunday, Easter Sunday, and Easter weekend. I asked him to do it in a very specific way. I asked him to teach us how to approach Easter through the cross. See, the only way to really grip Easter is through the cross. And so I asked Joel to teach us how to approach Easter through the wonder, the glory, and the mystery of the cross...not as an abstract idea, but something that is central to our lives on the deep, personal, experiential level.

Now, Joel's uneasy with this. This'll be his third sermon ever, ok? And I usually give him a year between sermons. This one is only about four or five weeks since he preached his second sermon; and he's uneasy...four weeks [Joel echoes 'four weeks']. How many minutes and hours? Ok. He's uneasy with this. But I'm absolutely convinced he's ready for it. And all I've asked him to do is teach us how *he* approaches worship through the cross; because of all the people I know, Joel is the one that lives out the centrality of the cross in such a way that I look at him and I say, "Joel, I wanna worship like you." And so I told him, "Don't worry about how fancy you talk, or anything else. You lead, we will follow."

Joel Stamoolis: It is Palm Sunday, these are actually palm branches (imported to Alaska), and it is, as Larry mentioned, a very special time of year for us as a church...because we celebrate in a very focused way the very core elements of our faith—the death and resurrection of our Lord. And my goal this morning is simply to affirm that as we look at the Palm Sunday story, and then, as Larry said, to give us something very practical that we can do during the week to prepare for next weekend's worship.

So we'll begin with the Palm Sunday story. The worship team read parts of it already, but we're gonna follow a pattern, actually, I use in my Tuesday morning men's Bible study. In my Bible study we read anything we study at least twice, sometimes more. Because the most important thing about studying the Word is hearing it. So I'm gonna read the Palm Sunday story again, and you can follow along. In the gospel of Luke, chapter 19, beginning with verse 29

When He [Jesus] approached Bethphage and Bethany, near the mount that is called Olivet, He sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you; there, as you enter, you will find a colt tied on which no one yet has ever sat; untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' you shall say, 'The Lord has need of it.'" So those who were sent went away and found it just as He had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord has need of it." They brought it to Jesus, and they threw their coats on the colt and put Jesus on it. As He was going, they were spreading their coats on the road. As soon as He was approaching, near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the miracles which they had seen, shouting:

*"BLESSED IS THE KING WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD;
Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"*

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, rebuke Your disciples." But Jesus answered, "I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!"

Luke 19:29-40

The disciples were excited; they were very excited. They recognized Jesus as the Messiah, the Anointed One, the promised son of David the king. And Jesus, their King, was riding into Jerusalem to claim the victory. And so, we're told, they took their coats, spread them out in the road before Him, which was a sign of respect. John's gospel tells us that they cut palm branches and waved them, which was something you did in celebration of victory. And they were celebrating! They began to praise God with a loud voice, and they shouted, "*BLESSED IS THE KING WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!*" The disciples were very excited.

And as we look back at this scene in the hindsight of the cross, we can see that the disciples had so many things so very right. Jesus was, indeed, the Messiah, the Anointed One, the promised son of David the king. Jesus, the King, was riding into victory. Only what the disciples didn't understand at that point in time was the nature, the magnitude, or the cost of Jesus' victory. We're told earlier, in chapter 19, that the disciples

...supposed that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately. Luke 19:11

They didn't understand that first the Messiah had to be crucified, even though this is what Jesus had been telling them all along, even though this is what the Old Testament prophets had prophesied. Earlier in Luke, in chapter 9, Jesus says to His disciples,

"Let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men." Luke 9:44

And again He tells them, in chapter 18,

"Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all the things which are written through the prophets about the Son of Man will be accomplished. For He will be handed over to the Gentiles, and will be mocked and mistreated and spit upon, and after they have scourged Him, they will kill Him; and the third day He will rise again." Luke 18:31-33

But then the text says

But the disciples understood none of these things, and the meaning of this statement was hidden from them, and they did not comprehend the things that were said. Luke 18:34

What the disciples weren't able to comprehend until after the resurrection was that Jesus, on that day, was not riding into Jerusalem to overthrow the rulers and authorities but to be delivered into their hands. For He was riding into Jerusalem to overthrow an even greater tyrant...our own sin, which He did through the strangest of victories, being nailed to a cross.

We sang a song a couple weeks ago...

*Behold the King nailed to a cross, a victory like no other,
The Prince of Peace has reconciled the sinner to the Father.
Be lifted up, O heavenly gates, behold the King of Glory!
Behold the King who bore our sin,
All hail the King, all hail LORD Jesus!*

Behold, the King was nailed to a cross. It was a victory like no other. And although the disciples at this point didn't understand the nature, or the magnitude, or the cost of Jesus' victory, their response was correct on that Palm Sunday. It was so right. They worshipped. We're told that they praised God with a loud voice. And they hailed the King, Jesus, and shouted *"BLESSED IS THE KING WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!"* They were so right in their response to worship, for when some of the Pharisees asked Jesus to rebuke His disciples He says, *"I tell you, if these remain silent, even the stones will cry out!"*

And so here we are, almost two thousand years later, Palm Sunday, looking back at the King riding into Jerusalem to win the victory. And our response, just like the disciples, should be worship. And it is! This morning, and next weekend as we walk through the story of the death and resurrection, we spend a lot of time in just focused worship. It's a very special time of focused worship for us as a church, for us as a congregation, and also for the church as a whole, worldwide and throughout history.

When you look at church history you find that Easter was the first holiday that the church really started celebrating; long before the church started celebrating Christmas the early church was celebrating Easter. And they first did this simply by meeting on Sunday, the first day of the week, the day that Jesus rose from the dead. We take this for granted because in our culture Sunday is part of the weekend; but in the middle east, then as well as now, Sunday is not part of the weekend. It's a work day, it's the first day of the week. And the early church's decision to meet on Sundays was a very deliberate celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus. In addition to meeting on the first day of the week they also started to set aside time annually, around the time of Passover, to celebrate in even more focused manner the death and the resurrection of Jesus.

And over the centuries various Easter celebration traditions have emerged. What we do here at Wasilla Bible Church is Friday evening at seven o'clock, as Larry mentioned, we meet here for Good Friday communion service. It's a 'Christ at Center' communion service, which means we put the cross in the middle of the room, all the chairs are facing the cross, the whole service is centered around the act of taking communion together and remembering Christ's death. We have Christ at Center services three times a year: the first Sunday of the school year, first Sunday of the calendar year, and on Good Friday. And Good Friday is by far the darkest, most somber service that we have all year long, for we read aloud the crucifixion story. It's the most somber service that we have, but it's probably also the most encouraging; because as we read the story of Jesus' crucifixion, as we slow down and take communion together, we ponder the amazing grace of our God. And then Sunday morning: sunrise service, 7 a.m., Hatcher Pass on the bridge, just as the disciples...some of them went early to the tomb on that first Easter morning and in the early morning light learned that Jesus had risen from the dead. So we gather in the early morning light outside of Hatcher Pass and proclaim our risen LORD and pledge our allegiance to Him. And then at 9:30 and 11:15 Easter morning services. We have elementary school-aged kids up, sitting with their families, choir, instruments, and we just fill this room with praises of our risen LORD, with great Easter anthems. And then Sunday evening the baptism service at five o'clock, for those in our congregation who have not yet made a public profession of faith and who have chosen to do so, mark their commitment with baptism. It's a rich weekend of worship. It's my favorite weekend of the year. It's a great time for us as a congregation, in a very focused way, to worship our LORD.

And so how can we prepare for Easter worship? And what can we do individually in the week that will make our time together richer next weekend? A couple weeks ago Pastor Larry asked me to preach on Palm Sunday, and to talk about how to prepare for Easter worship. And immediately two thoughts came to mind. Honestly, the first one was "Palm Sunday? Is he joking? That's by far my busiest time of year." The second thought was "He's right. It would be really good for us to talk about how we can prepare for Easter worship." That's a great thing for us to be thinking about because whether we're aware of it or not, our worship of God during the week, the degree to which we honor Him as God in our lives, fuels the fire of our congregational worship together on Sunday mornings. And so it's good, especially as we head into such a focused weekend of worship as Easter is, that we think about how we can prepare.

How can we prepare? A number of things come to mind. First of all, read the story. Spend time in the gospels. As many times as you've read the passion story in the gospels, the word of God is living and active, and He will speak afresh to us if we will take the time to slow down, to read, to listen. In addition to reading the story we can tell the story. Easter week is a great time to be praying for and to be looking for opportunities to give witness to the reality of Jesus Christ. And as we give witness to others about the reality of Jesus Christ in our lives, our hearts are stirred to worship. In addition to reading the story and telling the story, we can begin to sing the story. We can warm up our hearts as well as our voices as we sing those great songs of redemption. Another thing we can do to prepare is a spiritual discipline called fasting. It's the voluntary act of foregoing something normal, such as food, for a period of time so that we have more time to focus and spend time with the LORD. These are all great ways to prepare. I encourage you to do all or any of these. There are other things I could mention, too; but if I had to highlight one way that we could prepare for Easter worship it would definitely be repentance. Repentance should be at the heart of our Easter worship preparation.

What is repentance? Repentance is the act of turning away from our sin toward our Savior. It's what we do when we become a Christian, but it's also a large part of how we grow in holiness. The mechanics are fairly simple. We confess our sins, we acknowledge our wrong before God, and we ask for His forgiveness. Now sometimes, as Christians, we're not very good at actually asking God for forgiveness. We know that in Christ Jesus all our sins are paid for. We've been washed clean. And so sometimes we forget to ask. We forget to have that interaction with God, even though He has instructed us to do so. Jesus, when He was teaching His disciples how to pray, says "Pray, 'Forgive us our sins'." And we can assume that He intended us to pray this with some regularity, because it immediately follows the request "Give us this day our daily bread."

God desires that we not take His forgiveness for granted, but that we actually interact with Him and ask Him for it. Let me give you an analogy. My two oldest sons...Malachi, who's five, and Kaleb, who's three...they both really like to drink milk, and they know that milk is also good for them. And they also know that I, as their father, will not withhold a glass of milk from them. In fact, they even know that, essentially, all the milk in the house is theirs to drink. And so sometimes at the dinner table they can be very forgetful, and will look at their empty cup, kind of bang it on the table, and they'll say, "I don't have any milk. I want some milk. I need milk!" And then they'll look at me with this look that says, "Dad, what's your problem?" And I'll look at them with a look that says, "Have you actually asked me for anything yet?" And then the light goes on, and they go, "Daddy, could I please have a glass

of milk?" "Sure! I thought you'd never ask!" Why do I want my sons to actually ask me? Because ultimately it establishes a right relationship between us.

God wants us to set our hearts right before Him. He wants us to ask. Isaiah 30:18 says

The LORD longs to be gracious to you. He waits on high to have compassion on you.

And so we do as Jesus instructed and we ask, we pray, "Forgive us our sins." And when we do ask we need to do so with sincerity. We need to be willing to actually let go of our sin emotionally. It doesn't mean much to say, "I'm sorry, forgive me," while we're still holding on tightly to our sin. Remember our definition for repentance...turning away from our sin toward our Savior. We need to be willing to let go of our desire for that sin, and hold onto Jesus. This doesn't mean that we'll be perfect from then on out. God knows that we will sin again; He knows that we are weak. Psalm 103 says He is mindful of this. But we need to be willing to let go of our grip on it and hold onto our Savior.

We need to be willing to actually be reconciled to God, which also means that we need to be willing to be reconciled to others. This is part of asking with sincerity. Often, when we confess our sins to God and we ask for forgiveness, He will prompt us to go and seek forgiveness from those we have wronged. We also need to be willing to forgive those who have wronged us. Jesus' teaching is very clear on this. We can't expect forgiveness from God if we're unwilling to give it to anyone else. We need to ask with sincerity.

We also need to ask with faith. I'm ashamed to admit that there are sins in my life that I've repented of, are no longer part of my life, that I've still brought to God multiple times...asking His forgiveness because I didn't believe that He would actually forgive me such an awful thing. When we ask forgiveness we need to ask in faith that God actually will forgive us...not because our sins aren't ugly, awful, not because we deserve His forgiveness, but because Jesus' death was more than sufficient. This is repentance...turning away from our sin toward our Savior; it means confessing our sins, asking His forgiveness with sincerity and with faith. It's what we do when we become a Christian, it's a large part of how we grow in holiness, and it's a great way to prepare for Easter.

It's interesting when you look at church history...almost as soon as the church started to celebrate Easter each year they started to prepare for Easter worship. And repentance is at the heart of Easter worship preparation. Why is repentance such a great preparation for Easter worship? I'll give you two reasons. First of all, God desires that all of our worship be brought to Him with repentant hearts. Any outward act of worship that we give to God needs to come inwardly from a repentant heart. Psalm 51...David is talking about temple sacrifices, which is an outward act of worship in the Old Testament. And he says

*You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it;
You are not pleased with burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.*

And he goes on to say

*Then You will delight in righteous sacrifices,
In burnt offering and whole burnt offering;*
Psalm 51:16-17, 19

Our songs, our offerings, whatever outward act of worship that we bring to God, needs to be brought to Him with a repentant heart. There are a number of Scripture texts that speak to this. One of my favorites is Isaiah chapter 1, verse 11, and following. God says

"What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me? I have had enough..."

And then He goes on and lists a number of different outward acts of worship in the Old Testament: the temple sacrifices, the keeping of the Sabbath, assembling together, religious feasts and holidays... And He says in verse 14

"They have become a burden to Me; I am weary of bearing them.

And in verse 16 He says why:

“Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight.”

God desires that we worship Him with repentant hearts.

One of the most encouraging things for me about being worship pastor here is getting to work with all the godly men and women on our worship teams. And I'm consistently encouraged and humbled by the fact that when our worship teams pray for our morning services, they spend as much time praying for their hearts and for your hearts as they do for anything else; because they know that the worship that God desires to receive from us needs to come from a humble, repentant heart.

The second reason that repentance is such a great preparation for Easter worship is because in repentance we see most clearly the grace of the cross. If you continue in that Isaiah 1 passage we were looking at, after God tells them to repent He says,

*“Come, let us reason together.
Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be white as snow;
Though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool.”*

You wanna experience Easter on a heart level, then spend time this week acknowledging your sin to God, letting go of it, asking His forgiveness, and holding onto Jesus, in whose death we are forgiven and made righteous.

Repentance is not necessarily an easy or a fun thing to do. It can be painfully humbling to acknowledge our sin. And sometimes we find that we don't wanna let go of it. Sometimes we even have trouble asking God to help us leg go of certain sins. And yet, just so we're clear on this, I'm not prescribing a downer week for us. You wanna have a downer week? Then don't confess your sins to God. Psalm 32...

*When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away...
For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me;
My vitality, my strength, was drained away as with the fever heat of summer.*

Then goes on...

*So I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide;
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD”;
And You forgave the guilt of my sin.*

My prayer for us this week is that we would all come next weekend with the first verse of this psalm as our testimony.

*How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven,
Whose sin is covered!*

Repentance can be difficult, but it is ultimately refreshing. And it's my prayer that this week we all be refreshed in the centrality of the cross, the wondrous grace found in Jesus Christ. So if you'd look in your bulletin you'll find a yellow bookmark. You can go ahead and take that out. And you'll see at the top it says, simply, “Daily Exercise”. Set aside time this week each day; spend time with the LORD confessing your sins, ask His forgiveness, and then read of His mercy. I have some suggested readings for each day. The first four days take us through a set of psalms related to God's forgiveness and His mercy. And then the next four days take us through the story of the cross, where we see that forgiveness poured out abundantly for us.

If you turn the bookmark over I have three sample prayers of repentance. These are prayers that I've found very helpful over the years. I like to have things very clear and concrete that I can follow in my spiritual life. These have been very helpful because I can simply pray them word-for-word, or I can use them as a spring board for more prayer. The first prayer is based on the two greatest commandments: Love the LORD God with all your heart, soul,

mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. And I love this prayer because, as such, it's so all-inclusive.

I confess that I've sinned against You in thought, word, and deed, by what I have done, and by what I have left undone. I have not loved You with my whole heart; I have not loved my neighbor as myself. I am truly sorry and I humbly repent. For the sake of Your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on me and forgive me.

The second prayer comes from Psalm 19. I love this prayer because it acknowledges the simple fact that there are things that we do, there are sins that we commit, wrong that we do, that we're unaware of. And so it begins

Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults. Keep Your servant also from willful sins.

And the last prayer comes from Luke 18. Jesus again is teaching on prayer. And I love this prayer because it's so simple, and it hits right at the heart of the matter.

God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

So take this bookmark and each day this week confess your sins, ask God's forgiveness, read of His mercy; and come next weekend ready to worship our King who, almost two thousand years ago, on this day rode into Jerusalem to be beaten, mocked, spit upon, and nailed to a cross, that you and I might stand forgiven before God.

Would you stand with me?

The goal this week is to be refreshed in the centrality of the cross, in our own lives personally; but as we go from here, also mindful of the fact that there are people God has placed in our lives who have never tasted the forgiveness of the Father found in Jesus Christ. And so we'll close with our Prayer for Witness.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Amen. Go in the truth and the grace of our God.