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Will You Make It Back to Paradise?

Easter Message
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Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live with someone who's perfect? Ladies, have you ever thought about what it'd be like to be married to a man who is perfect—perfect in kindness, perfect in love, perfect in gentleness, perfect in all his decisions? My wife thinks it's great. *Just kidding.* Men, have you ever wondered what it would be like to live with a perfect wife: perfect in her love, perfect in her compassion, perfect in her love for fishing (!), perfect in every way? Perfect children; perfect parents. Perfect employees; perfect employers. At first thought, it seems like that would be great. But I'm not so sure it would be as great as we think it would be, because there's something within us that would react to that.

It happened 2000 years ago. There was a perfect Man, and He was perfect in every way. He was perfect in His love. He was perfect in His compassion. He was perfect in His kindness. He was perfect in His wisdom. And they executed Him. Why did they do that? I think sometimes we make ourselves feel better by imagining that those people in the first century were monsters. But they weren't. They were people like you and like me. And they took a perfect Man and they executed Him.

In order to understand what happened, we really have to understand that the Bible, from the beginning to the end, paints two very clear pictures. There's a picture painted of God and who He is; and there's a picture painted of us and who we are. There is this collision, at the cross, when those two forces meet.

The Bible is God's self-revelation—God revealing Himself to us. So in every story, in every passage, we ask the question, “What is it that God wanted us to know about Himself from this story, from this passage?”

So we go all the way back to Genesis chapter 1 and we begin to cultivate a view of God. We begin to understand what God wanted us to know about Himself. Genesis 1 is the picture of God as the Creator God: a God of remarkable power; a God who spoke the universe into place.

As we develop more and more technology, we continue to learn that the universe is far vaster than we ever could have imagined. As a matter of fact, scientists now wonder if we'll ever get to the edge of it. It just seems to go on endlessly. But it's not just the vastness of the universe. It's the beauty of a sunset. Or staring at a little ant that's walking across the sidewalk and wondering how God made it able to do that.

About the time we are in awe of creation, Genesis 1 reminds us it's not creation that is awesome at all. It is the *God* who simply spoke the universe into place. Genesis 1 introduces us to this big God—so big that He seems far away; so big that He seems unknowable.

So God reintroduces Himself in Genesis chapter 2 as a very personal, intimate God: a God who created men and women in His image. The text says that He formed Adam out of the dust of the ground and very carefully and very wonderfully formed him just the way He wanted him. Then the text says He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. It's very

intimate and very personal language, as a way of saying this God is very intimately involved with the people He has created.

The text says we were created in His image. It's the ability to have a will; the ability to give and receive love, to enter into relationships. God made us in His image because He wants us to dwell in relationship with Him. So this God who seems so *big* is a God who is also so *intimate*.

Then God did quite a remarkable thing. He created this beautiful garden that He described in His own words as Paradise. God said it was both pleasurable to look at and pleasurable to eat—a really remarkable place that He called Paradise. God took Adam and Eve, whom He had created in His image, placed them in the garden, and in essence said, “This is your home. This is what I want for you. I want us to dwell in perfect relationship, and I want you to live in this place called Paradise. Be fruitful and multiply.”

Genesis 2 offers one of the most significant images of God that we can ever capture. People have all kinds of crazy ideas about God and who He is. But one of the most important images that we have to grasp is that God has always wanted a place called Paradise for those He has created in His image. He has always wanted this place where He could pour out His goodness and His blessings. It's a beautiful picture of the heart of God.

I love the picture in Exodus of God as seen on Mount Sinai. God Himself describes it in quite graphic language. He talks about His presence on Sinai: “as the earth begins to tremble.” It's a place of lightning and thunder; it's a place filled with smoke and fire—all representing the awesomeness of the glory of God. It's into that environment that Moses begins to ascend the mount to meet with God.

While he's on that mountain, Moses said, “God, I'd like to see Your glory.” God said, “Moses, you can't see My glory and live. It's too great. But here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to take you and put you in the cleft of the rock. I will put My hand over the cleft of the rock, and I'm going to pass by. At the last minute, when I'm just about completely past, I'm going to pull My hand back and you can see just the tail-end of My glory. But that's all you can handle and still live.” That's God's way of giving us a peek at the awesomeness of His glory.

Isaiah chapter 6 is the story of Isaiah's vision, and it's a remarkable vision of the holiness of God. The scene is much like Sinai—there is smoke and the ground shakes. As Isaiah gets just a glimpse of the holiness of God, all he can do is fall flat on his face and he's paralyzed there.

If you take these marvelous images of God as the Creator God, the intimate and good God, the God of glory and holiness, and bring them together into the New Testament, you then remember that same God was the God who was laid in a manger as a baby that first Christmas day. The Bible tells us the angels rejoiced and probably wondered what was going on.

That Baby grew up to be a perfect Man—perfect in every way. I love the images of Jesus that are painted for us in the Gospels. He made the lame to walk; He made the blind to see; He raised the dead to life. I love the picture painted in the Gospels of the widow who lost her son. How her heart must have been grieving as this funeral procession was headed to the

burial place. He was dead...all hope was gone. Then they met Jesus...and that boy went from death to life.

I love the picture of Jesus when He encountered the demoniac. In my opinion, this is the most hopeless picture of a person in all of the New Testament. He was crazy. He was naked and chained to a cave. He was absolutely hopeless, with no hope for his family or his friends, until He met Jesus. In a matter of moments, the man went from a lunatic to being commissioned as a missionary to go back to his hometown and share what Jesus had done.

But maybe my favorite images in all of the Gospels are those times when Jesus made contact with the lepers. You have to understand that in the first century people were very afraid of leprosy. Lepers were removed from their family and their friends. They were removed from their community and isolated somewhere outside of town, where they would dwell with fellow lepers until they were declared clean. They would stay there for months... years...sometimes for a lifetime. While they were there, they had no human contact. No one hugged them. No one touched them. Can you imagine what it would be like to go years without a human touch?

Notice when the Gospels talk about Jesus coming into contact with the lepers, it typically says, "And He touched them." For some of them, it had been years of no human contact, and Jesus touched them. He touched them and He made them whole. And their lives were never be the same, because that's what Jesus does. He touches the untouchables. He touches those who are down and out, the losers, and He makes them whole.

That's why it's hard to understand why they executed Him. Why did they do that to someone who had done nothing but good? He had healed their friends. He had raised their children to life. He had loved them. He had done nothing but good, and they killed Him.

To understand what happened, you again have to go back to the beginning, because the Bible also paints a picture of us, as people made in God's image. It really starts in Genesis chapter 3 when the serpent comes along and begins to tempt Adam and Eve. Now, if you didn't know the story, I would say that the serpent had no chance. He should have given it up, because Adam and Eve were dwelling in perfect harmony with God. They were in a place called Paradise, and they were experiencing the blessings and the goodness of God. What more could they want? What could be tempting to them?

But the enemy knew what button to push. He began to say to them, "You know, you can be God. You can decide for yourself what's right and wrong. You can run the show for yourself. Nobody should tell you what to do. You can be God." And Adam and Eve began to think, *That sounds good.*

Do you ever watch an athletic event or something on television and find yourself yelling at the referee, or the players, or the coaches? Well, that's what I do with Genesis chapter 3. I yell at Adam and Eve, and I ask them, "What are you doing? What are you thinking?" We don't know why they would do that, but they did. They chose to sin against God, and God removed them from Paradise.

You see it again in Genesis 4 when Cain and Abel both brought sacrifices to God. Abel's sacrifice was acceptable. Cain's was not, because Cain just did it his own way, and God could take it or leave it. It's the first picture we get of how God is going to respond to

that attitude. God doesn't come as an angry judge—He comes as a loving heavenly Daddy. God is saying to Cain, "Cain, what are you doing? Why are you doing that? Change your ways. Come to Me as I've invited you, as I've said. Let Me pour out My goodness and My blessings on you."

But Cain would have none of it. Cain bowed his neck and dug in his heels. In essence, what he says is, "No, I'm going to be God. I'm going to decide for myself what I'm going to do. I'll decide for myself what's right and wrong. I'm going to offer my sacrifice my way, God, and You can take it or leave it."

When you read through the Bible, you find that is the picture that's painted of us, as people made in God's image. There is this struggle going on between He, who is God, and we, who want to be God.

You see it again when Moses is up on Mount Sinai—that magnificent scene that we talked about. Moses is meeting with the true God. Aaron and the people are down below, and they decide to have a party. They decide to make their own god, so they make this golden calf out of the gold that they have. Moses descends the mountain (remember he's just been with God) and when he sees these people what he says, in essence, is, "What are you people doing? You're not God. I've been with God."

You go all the way into the New Testament and nothing's changed. In the New Testament it's disguised as religion, but it's not any different. It's just people deciding they are going to determine for themselves what is right and what is wrong. They're going to call their own shots. They're going to be in charge.

You see, at first when Jesus was doing miracles and doing some pretty amazing things, the people thought that was pretty good. The crowds began to follow, wondering what He would do next. But then Jesus began to teach what it meant to be His follower. Essentially, what He began to teach was, "By the way, I'm God and you're not. And that's the way it's going to work." That didn't go over very well. As a matter of fact, the religious leaders became more and more angry and they rallied the crowd behind them.

We pick up the scene in Mark 15, which is what I'd like to read this morning. It's the story of Jesus before Pilate, and then Jesus on the cross. As I read through this passage, remember that Jesus was not a mass-murderer. Jesus was perfect in every way. Jesus was perfect in His love...perfect in His kindness...perfect in His compassion. He had done nothing but love these people. He had healed their sick and made them whole. Remember that as we read through this. Also notice the depth of the emotion: the anger and hatred that these people vented on this perfect Man.

Mark 15:

And early in the morning the chief priests with the elders and scribes, and the whole Council, immediately held a consultation, and binding Jesus, they led Him away, and delivered Him up to Pilate. And Pilate questioned Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" And answering He said to him, "It is as you say." And the chief priests began to accuse Him harshly. And Pilate was questioning Him again, saying, "Do You make no answer? See how many charges they bring against You!" But Jesus made no further answer; so that Pilate was astonished.

Now at the feast he used to release for them any one prisoner whom they requested. And the man named Barabbas had been imprisoned with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the insurrection. And the multitude went up and began asking him to do as he had been accustomed to do for them. And Pilate answered them, saying, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" For he was aware that the chief priests had delivered Him up because of envy. But the chief priests stirred up the multitude to ask him to release Barabbas for them instead. And answering again, Pilate was saying to them, "Then what shall I do to Him whom you call the King of the Jews?" And they shouted back, "Crucify Him!" But Pilate was saying to them, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify Him!" And wishing to satisfy the multitude, Pilate released Barabbas for them, and after having Jesus scourged, he delivered Him over to be crucified.

And the soldiers took Him away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium), and they called together the whole Roman cohort. And they dressed Him up in purple, and after weaving a crown of thorns, they put it on Him; and they began to acclaim Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they kept beating His head with a reed, and spitting at Him, and kneeling and bowing before Him. And after they had mocked Him, they took the purple off Him, and put His garments on Him. And they led Him out to crucify Him.

And they pressed into service a passerby coming from the country, Simon of Cyrene (the father of Alexander and Rufus), that he might bear His cross.

And they brought Him to the place Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull. And they tried to give Him wine mixed with myrrh; but He did not take it. And they crucified Him, and divided up His garments among themselves, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. And it was the third hour when they crucified Him. And the inscription of the charge against Him read, "THE KING OF THE JEWS." And they crucified two robbers with Him; one on the right and one on the left. (And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And He was numbered with transgressors.") And those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads, and saying, "Ha! You who were going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself, and come down from the cross!" In the same way the chief priests along with the scribes were also mocking Him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; He cannot save Himself. Let this Christ, the King of Israel, now come down from the cross, so that we may see and believe!" And those who were crucified with Him were casting the same insult at Him.

And when the sixth hour had come, darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "ELOI, ELOI, LAMA SABACHTANI?" which is translated, "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME?" And when some of the bystanders heard it, they began saying, "Behold, He is calling for Elijah." And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed, and gave Him a drink, saying, "Let us see whether Elijah will come to take Him down." And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed His last. And the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who was standing right in front of Him, saw the way He breathed His last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

And He was. He was the Son of God who was perfect in every way. So why did they do this to Him? They didn't just stop following Him. They didn't just run Him out of town. They didn't just want Him thrown into a prison. They wanted Him to suffer the most gruesome, excruciating death that was available.

You read that passage and you realize this was a horrible scene. These people seem almost inhuman. By the time Jesus was done being scourged, He would have been a mass of raw flesh—something most of us couldn't even look at. But these people weren't done. They continued to beat on Him. They continued to mock Him. They continued to spit on Him. And even as He hung there on that cross in complete agony, they still weren't done. They continued to mock.

What was wrong with these people? I think what it reveals is the depth of the passion of the determination to be God. And for them it came down to Jesus ... or them. So Jesus had to go.

Mark reminds us there were two thieves: one on the right and one on the left. Luke tells us there was a dialogue between these thieves and Jesus. I think these two thieves represent every single person who has ever drawn breath. All of us either identify with one thief or the other.

One of the thieves had lived his whole life as his own God. He had called his own shots and he had run his own show. He had lived his own life his own way. And as he hung on the cross, he was determined to die that way. So he continued to mock Jesus with the crowd.

The other thief, too, had lived his whole life as his own God. He had run his own show. He had been in charge and had called his own shots. But at that moment, in the final moments of his life, he recognized he wasn't God at all. He recognized he was a sinner in desperate need of a Savior. He cried out to Jesus, and Jesus said, "Today you shall be with Me in Paradise."

You see, that is what God has always wanted for us. And that's what the cross is all about. It's about what God was willing to do to get sinful people—sinful men and women who have believed that they were gods and could run their own show and live their own lives—somehow back to Paradise, where He could pour out His goodness and His blessing on them. That's what God has always wanted.

Jesus said the majority of people that ever live will be like the thief on the cross who had no need for a Savior. We disguise it in all kinds of ways, even in religion, as they did in the first century. But ultimately the majority of people will go to their grave running their own lives, calling their own shots, doing their own thing.

But there will also be those people who somewhere along the way will recognize they're not God. They will realize they are sinners in desperate need of a Savior. They will cry out to Jesus to be their Savior, and Jesus will forgive their sin and enter into a relationship with them. And they will spend forever with Jesus in Paradise, where He can pour out His goodness and His blessing, as He has always wanted to do.

What will *your* choice be? The hymnwriter said it well:

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ, my God;
All the vain things that charm me most—
I sacrifice them to His blood.

See, from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small:
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

- *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* by Isaac Watts