

## Title: “The Tree”

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John 19:31-36

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**Lesson:** God was tuned into our imperfections and sent his son as a substitute for us. Jesus died as our perfect, unbroken, unblemished lamb. Through him we come into full perfection.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

<sup>31</sup> Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away. <sup>32</sup> So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. <sup>33</sup> But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. <sup>34</sup> But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. <sup>35</sup> He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe. <sup>36</sup> For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: “Not one of his bones will be broken.”

There was once a tree, an evergreen, that grew in the front yard of a house. It was an unremarkable tree, really, and many who passed by never paid any attention to it if they ever even noticed it. The homeowners noticed it, though, because that tree was dying. It was rotting from the inside out and as each year passed, they could see how it looked just a little less healthy than it did the year before. The needles seemed to fall from its branches more frequently. Areas now lay bare where they hadn't before. What used to be hidden on the inside couldn't help but show itself on the outside and so the tree slowly became imperfect - disfigured and flawed. For years the owners attended to its poor health, trying to bring it back to life, trying to alter its prognosis, but nothing worked; its health continued to decline. And so, in the end, they resigned to simply caring for it, comforting it as best they could. They trimmed its branches in the spring and decorated it with lights in the winter. They helped it put on its best face for all the world to see. But it didn't change the simple fact that the tree was sick, terminally ill.

We can often relate to that poor tree, can't we? How often do we see ourselves as flawed and disfigured? How often do we find ourselves lacking the emotional, or physical, or economical health that we expect or demand from ourselves? We know we should be just a bit thinner or just a bit happier than we are right now. We know that we should be making or saving or investing more money than we seem to be doing. But like the disfigured branches of that tree, our imperfections are really only the visible signs of a problem that is much more terminal. Deep inside of our core is a spiritual imperfection, a spiritual flaw. We are not perfect; we are sinful. And we rebel against God. He demands our perfection, he demands our obedience, but we reject that - we reject him. We fight against this relationship and against him. We even fight against the very reality that we are in this state of sickness. Instead, we keep it hidden within ourselves. We push it deep so that the world can't see it - so that even we can't see it, because we don't want to face the diagnosis. We don't want to admit that we are sinful, that we are corrupt. And so, we hide it from ourselves and

from the world. We put on our best face and focus on the things that we can control. We focus on the things that we think will help hide our true health. We lose weight; we make more money; we acquire more power and authority. We do all this and more, but that doesn't change the simple fact that we are still sick, still terminally ill.

So, what do we need? Do we need a makeover? Do we need more dressings on the outside? Do we need to make more money? Do we need to be nicer to other people? Maybe instead of focusing on the outside we focus on the inside. Maybe we just need more faith? Maybe we need to pray to God to heal us, to make us whole again. Maybe we need God to give us a makeover.

I will tell you this. I don't need a makeover. That will do me no good. I am so corrupt from the inside out that there is no prognosis, no solution except for my death. I deserve nothing more than this. And left to my own devices that is exactly what I will get - it is exactly what my life will lead me to. So, I don't need a makeover. I don't need God to give me one. I need God to kill me. I need God to cut me down like the owners should have done with the tree. I need him to lay me down in the tomb with Jesus and then raise me up with a new life. My sinful life can't be saved; I need a new one. And if God doesn't kill me, if God doesn't give me new life, I will be forever dead - forever separated from him. You see, I simply can't save myself. I simply can't do *anything* except continue in my corrupt ways, continue down my corrupt path. So, if I am going to be saved, if I am going to be given new life, it will *have* to come from him.

My life, my salvation will have to come through the death of Jesus. There is no other way. My sins demand judgement. They demand punishment. My sins accuse me before God, and I can only plead guilty. My sentence can only be eternal separation from God; it can only be death. So, if I am to have any hope at all, it will have to come from a substitute. And this substitute will have to be perfect in every way. It will have to have no blemish, no imperfection, no sin. And it will have to suffer my judgement and my punishment in my place. It will have to die. And that is exactly what Jesus did. God sent him down to take our place, to suffer our judgment. And in perfect obedience he went to the cross and gave up his life to save ours.

But how can we be assured that the work of Jesus earned our salvation? How can we trust in that hope? Well, on Easter we will celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. We will celebrate his defeat over sin and death, but tonight what we have is his lifeless body. And tonight, the disciples had only that as well. They had the *promise* of the resurrection but had yet to experience it. But what they did have, even that night, was a hint of that promise. What they had was yet another example of God keeping every last promise that he had made. And they could look at the body of Jesus and see that none of his bones had been broken. It may not sound like much to the world, but to the disciples it would be a reminder of God's promises. And even if they didn't see that sliver of hope, even if they didn't experience that little bit of comfort at the time, it would still be there when they later reflected on it.

There was another promise that was kept that night. And it was a promise so big, so encompassing, that it meant everything to the disciples, and it means everything to us tonight. In the garden, after the first sin, God promised a savior - one that would restore what we had broken. And on that cross that promise was kept. God *did* send a savior, a substitute. And from this substitute flowed blood and water - living blood and living water. This is what gives us life eternal; this is what saves us. This

is what is poured over us in our own baptism: the water that flows from the body of Christ. And that water was paid for by the blood that flows alongside it. In our baptism we are washed with the water *and* the blood of Jesus. Our sinful selves are drowned and placed alongside him in his tomb.

<Pause>

The tree that stood rotting in the neighbor's yard eventually did get cut down. In an afternoon it was felled and then burned because it was good for nothing else. But us? We have hope in our own death. Because Jesus hung from a tree, suffered what we deserved, we are saved from the fire. Paul writes that we are "buried therefore with [Jesus] by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in the newness of life." We are buried with Christ, but we don't stay in that tomb. Through the living blood and water of Jesus are raised with him. We become a new creation. And so, tonight we look upon the body of Christ, but we also anticipate Easter when we will celebrate his resurrection, and its promise to us. We are a new tree, the old is dead and gone and the new is created. And with it we have hope in life everlasting.

Let us pray.

Lord,

You were our substitute, our perfect sacrifice. Through you we have received not only forgiveness but a new life. Help us to remember our baptism where our sins were forgiven, and we were given new life in you.

In your name we pray.

Amen.