

Title: Days that Define Us

Text: Luke 23:33-46

Date: 9/12/2021

As I look back over the course of my life, I can think of several days that define my life, that have molded and shaped me into the person that I am. These are days that left such an impression on my soul that I can legitimately say, I would not be who I am today, if this day had never happened.

- The most obvious is the day I was born.
- I would say the next big day would be when my dad had a heart attack. I was only 6, and that day changed the course of my life forever. That was the day my parents resolved to raise my sister and me in church, that we would be in church every time the doors were open, no matter what.
- The next one would be the day I was saved. That's February 4, 1990. I gave my life to Jesus. That's the day Jesus saved my soul, and, from that point on, I've known my eternal salvation is secure.
- I don't know the exact date, but in the fall of 1998, I surrendered to full-time vocational ministry. That day, I gave up all my plans for my life, and I embraced God's plan for me to serve him full-time in the ministry.
- Other days that define my life include July 7, 2007, the day Emily and I got married.
- Then, there are January 25, 2010; May 26, 2011; January 11, 2013; and March 2, 2015... those are the days our children were born.

I'm sure if you look back over the course of your life, you can think of several days that define your life, as well.

Then, as I look back at the history of our nation, I find several days that define who we are as a nation. More specifically, I can think of several dark, tragic, traumatic days that define entire generations of Americans. I may miss something along the way. For that, I apologize, but, in living memory, I think we have to start with...

- *December 7, 1941* – On that day, the Japanese Imperial Navy launched an air assault on the US Naval Base at Pearl Harbor.
- *Then, there's November 22, 1963* – On that day, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated as he traveled through the Dealey Plaza in Dallas.
- *Next, would be January 28, 1986* – On that day, 73 seconds into its flight, the Challenger Space Shuttle broke apart and disintegrated over the Atlantic Ocean, killing all seven of its crew members.
- *Finally, there's September 11, 2001* – Twenty years ago yesterday, 19 men hijacked 4 passenger jets. They intentionally crashed two planes into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City; both towers collapsed within two hours. A third plane crashed into the Pentagon Building in Arlington, VA. The fourth plane, United Airlines Flight 93, crashed in a field near Shanksville, PA. It's intended target had been somewhere in Washington, D.C., most likely the capitol building. Nearly 3,000 people were killed in the attacks we've come to know simply as 9/11.

These are days that have defined us. These are dark days... tragic, traumatic days that have shaped and defined generations of Americans.

You may already know the story, but I want to tell you about one of the passengers who was on United Airlines Flight 93. That's the plane that crashed before it reached its target.

His name was Todd Beamer. He was a regular guy, 32 years of age. He and his wife had two sons and a daughter on the way. They were devoted Christians and had been teaching Sunday School for 6 years.

Evidently someone on the plane didn't turn off their cell phone. That's how the passengers found out the World Trade Center had been attacked. Todd made his way to the back of the plane and tried to place call from the onboard phone. He couldn't get through. He ended up on the line with a phone company supervisor named Lisa Jefferson.

Todd told her one passenger had been killed, and the pilot and co-pilot had been forced from the cockpit. He was on the phone with her when the plane suddenly turned and headed southeast.

Todd panicked briefly and then asked Lisa Jefferson to pray with him. Together they prayed:

*Our Father, which art in heaven,
Hallowed be Thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts
As we forgive our debtors.
Lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the kingdom,
And the power,
And the glory, forever.
Amen.*

After they prayed, Todd recited the 23rd Psalm:

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul:
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;
Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.*

Todd Beamer gave Lisa Jefferson his home phone number. He asked her to call his wife and tell her how much he loved her, and to let their boys know that he loved them and was proud of them. Then, he told her some of the passengers were going to jump the hijacker who claimed to have a bomb, and they were going to try to take control of the plane. He said, "We're going to do something, and I'm pretty sure I'm not going to get out of this."

The last thing Lisa Jefferson heard Todd Beamer say was this: “God help me. Jesus help me. Jesus. Are you guys ready? Let’s roll.” No one on United Airlines Flight 93 survived, but only God himself knows how many lives were saved because they laid down their lives and kept that plane from reaching its intended target.

I can’t say what motivated the other passengers to do what they did, but I like to think I know what motivated Todd Beamer. Todd was able to do what he did that day because his life was defined by a single day. One single day defined and shaped his life more than any other. It was a dark day, a tragic, traumatic day. It was a Friday, nearly 2,000 years ago. Here’s Luke’s account of it in chapter 23, beginning in verse 33.

³³When they came to a place called The Skull, they nailed him to the cross. And the criminals were also crucified—one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” And the soldiers gambled for his clothes by throwing dice. ³⁵The crowd watched and the leaders scoffed. “He saved others,” they said, “let him save himself if he is really God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.” ³⁶The soldiers mocked him, too, by offering him a drink of sour wine. ³⁷They called out to him, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” ³⁸A sign was fastened above him with these words: “This is the King of the Jews.” ³⁹One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed, “So you’re the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you’re at it!” ⁴⁰But the other criminal protested, “Don’t you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? ⁴¹We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn’t done anything wrong.” ⁴²Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” ⁴³And Jesus replied, “I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.” ⁴⁴By this time it was about noon, and darkness fell across the whole land until three o’clock. ⁴⁵The light from the sun was gone. And suddenly, the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn down the middle. ⁴⁶Then Jesus shouted, “Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!” And with those words he breathed his last. (NLT)

Todd Beamer was part of a generation of Americans who were largely shaped by the Cold War and the Challenger Space Shuttle Disaster. But I choose to believe Todd Beamer did what he did on September 11, 2001, not because he was defined by a day that took place during his own lifetime but because what happened on that Friday, nearly 2,000 years ago.

Days define us. Our individual lives are largely defined and shaped by single dates on a calendar. The lives of entire generations of Americans are defined and shaped by single dates on a calendar, especially the dark days, the tragic, traumatic days. And that’s ok. How could it not be ok? We can’t help but be shaped and formed by things like the Bombing of Pearl Harbor, JFK’s assassination, the Challenger Disaster, and 9/11. Those days necessarily define and shape who we are and how we live.

But at the end of the day, we have to stop and ask ourselves which defines us most? Which date on the calendar affects our lives more deeply and profoundly than any other day in history? If there is a single day in history that defines, more than any other, who we are and how we live, what is that day?

My hope, my prayer is that, even as we remember and reflect on the somber events that took place 20 years ago yesterday, even as we remember and honor the heroic sacrifices made by Todd Beamer and so many others...

My hope, my prayer is that we look back on the day Jesus was crucified as the day that, more than any other day in history, defines who we are and how we live, day in and day out.

Jesus willingly carried the cross; willingly shed His blood; willingly said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”; willingly gave up His life. Jesus said, “No one can take my life from me. I sacrifice it voluntarily.” Jesus willingly shed His blood and died, as a sacrifice to atone for every sin of every person who ever lived, so that when we die, we won’t have to spend eternity in hell, separated from God. Let that day define you.

By the way, Lisa Jefferson kept the promise she made to Todd Beamer. She called his wife the next day and told her what her husband had done. Todd’s wife said, “We all knew what kind of person Todd was. We know he’s in heaven. He was saved.”

Todd Beamer is in heaven, but not because of the heroic sacrifice he made on 9/11. Todd Beamer is in heaven because the day Jesus died on the cross was accompanied by another day, and that’s the day Todd gave his life to Jesus.

Nothing we do on this earth—no amount of good deeds or volunteer hours, no amount of money given to charitable causes, no amount of personal sacrifice—nothing we can do... on our own... can earn a spot in heaven.

Jesus died for us. He gave himself, willingly. He suffered and bled and died for our sins. That really happened. It happened that day on Calvary. And in order for us to enter heaven when we leave this world, the day Jesus died on the cross must be accompanied by another day... the day we give our lives to Jesus.

For me, that day was February 4, 1990. Since that day, I’ve been saved. My eternal salvation has been secure... because that’s the day I really, truly realized what Jesus did for me that day on the cross, and I gave my life to him.

Do you have a day like that in your own life? Can you honestly say there’s a point in your life where you really, truly came to realize what Jesus did for you that day on the cross, and you gave your life to Jesus? If you don’t, today can be that day.

You’ll be able to look back on September 12, 2021, as the day you were saved, and you’ll know that, from this point on, your eternal salvation will be secure, and you’ll know that, when you leave this world, you’ll spend eternity with the Lord.

If you’re ready to do that, I’m going to invite you to come forward. I’ll be here at the front to receive you. I’ll talk with you and pray with you. If you’re ready to give your life to Jesus, we’ll invite you to come as we sing our hymn of commitment.

Or perhaps you already know you’re saved, but at the same time, you know you’ve been letting a lot of other things define who you are and how you live. Make a rededication today. Devote yourself to letting the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross be the number one defining moment in your life. You may have other decisions...