



THE WAY OF THE CROSS

SERIES: THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE

Luke 23:26–43

83rd Message

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One year when I was in high school I took a summer school class. The class was located at a high school in downtown Omaha, in a not-so-great part of town. To make things a bit more complicated I had to take the bus home. The first day I got on the bus I realized there were about 20 boys who knew each other and I did not know a soul. Something was said to me or about me that drew everyone's attention. I felt the glare of 20 pairs of eyes on my back, knew that I could be in big trouble, and tried to hide my head in my shirt. Somehow the menacing moment passed and I arrived at my destination with my skin intact. Group mentality, glaring eyes, and demeaning mockery are very uncomfortable and unsettling to experience. My bus ride, however, was a miniscule fraction of what Jesus experienced on his way to the cross.

As we continue in Luke's passion narrative the cross of Christ will be our focus today and next week.

Procession to Calvary

And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus. And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. (Luke 23:26–27 ESV)

The trials that we have looked at for the past three weeks are now over. Jesus is handed over by Pilate to be crucified. The "they" in verse 26 would probably refer to the Jewish leadership and people who pressured Pilate into releasing Barabbas and crucifying Jesus. However, we also know that the Roman soldiers are involved. Luke omits the scourging that the other gospels include before the crucifixion and the crown of thorns. Again, Luke is all about healing and forgiveness.

In John we read that Jesus bore his own cross, which was customary for a condemned criminal. But Luke tells us that one Simon of Cyrene was pressed into service, seized upon, to help Jesus. Romans would not have carried the cross because of the shame associated with it. No doubt Jesus was exhausted and weak from his torment and torture.

Cyrene is now Tripoli located on the coast of northern Africa. Simon is in Jerusalem for the Passover, having come from either the country or the field. Simon Peter had promised Jesus he would go with him to prison and death. Now another Simon is with Jesus. Mark tells us that Simon was the father of Rufus and Alexander, indicating that perhaps this family became believers. There is a Rufus mentioned in Romans 16.

Luke tells us that there was a great multitude of people walking with Jesus in the procession to Calvary which would have included locals, pilgrims, and Roman soldiers. But Luke gives special note to a group of women who are mourning, which means to beat the breast, and lamenting through sorrowful tones or song. As we have

seen the presence of women in the ministry of Jesus is a distinctive of Luke's gospel.

Perhaps the mourning women are an allusion to Zechariah 12:

And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn. (Zech 12:10)

But a few verses later Zechariah goes on to say:

On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness. (Zech 13:1).

And that is exactly what will happen on the cross.

Ridolfo Ghirlandaio was a Renaissance painter influenced by Raphael, Michelangelo, and Da Vinci. In his painting, Procession to Calvary, Ghirlandaio helps us picture this throng of people accompanying Jesus. Let me share some insights on this painting that Juliet Benner makes in her book *Contemplative Vision*. In the right hand corner is a group following Jesus, coming out of the city, probably unaware but curious. They travel through an archway that is crumbling with a lone tree on top of it, foreshadowing the coming events.

In the left hand corner is another group heading to Calvary which probably includes the two thieves to be crucified with Jesus. Two crosses have been prepared for them on the hill at the top of the painting. Notice how the shorter horizontal beam of the cross and the spear form a triangle that brings focus to the distant hill. The red banner of a soldier marks the spot where Jesus will be crucified.

Jesus is bent over, dressed in a red robe and is being dragged by a man holding a rope tied to Jesus' waist. Jesus' face is calm and tranquil. Blood drips from his face and neck. He is submitting to his father's will and heading to the destination for which he came.

In front of Jesus are those who are hostile to him. They appear antagonistic and harsh.

The followers of Jesus are behind him. They are marked by golden haloes and have the same posture and tranquil appearance as Jesus. Here we see the women who are mourning. John is next to Mary, dressed in red, and gazing off into heaven. The followers of Jesus are learning to trust God even in suffering.

There are only two faces that appear to look outward towards the viewer rather than somewhere else. One is the man on the left who carries a rifle and points with his thumb back to Jesus. Perhaps he is saying, "look at him," and asking us "who do you say I am?"

There is also the face on the cloth held by the woman who kneels slightly behind Jesus. She has wiped the sweat and blood from Jesus' face and his face is imprinted on the cloth. This face invites the

viewer to bear the image of Jesus. Notice also how the woman's hands are touching Jesus, an invitation for the healing and salvation that Jesus offers.

The painting confronts us with questions about our own faith journey. Where are we in the picture? In which group of people do we belong? Are we willing to follow Jesus in his suffering and bear our own crosses in quiet trust of God? We are reminded of what Jesus said in chapter 14: “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:27).

Weep For Yourselves

But turning to them Jesus said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us,’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?” (Luke 23:28–31)

This prophetic word to the mourning women is unique to Luke. Daughters of Jerusalem represent the nation. Jesus tells them they are lamenting for the wrong person. Instead of weeping for him, they should be weeping for themselves and their children.

The reason Jesus tells them to weep for themselves is because hard times are going to come upon them, an allusion to 70 A.D. when the Romans would sack Jerusalem and destroy the temple. “Days are coming” denotes a significant time of God’s activity or times of judgment. Jesus himself had wept for Israel (19:41) and talked about coming judgment in chapter 21. The word order in the Greek text forms a neat chiasm for emphasis: weep not... for me...for yourselves...weep. This weeping might be an allusion to Jeremiah 9:17–20.

Like in the Beatitudes Jesus turns things upside down. The blessing of having children will be a curse. The curse of barrenness, wombs that never bore, and breasts that never gave nourishment become a blessing. The suffering will be so great that it will be better not to have a family. The painful sacking of Jerusalem will exceed the horrors of crucifixion.

The suffering will be so great people will want life to end. People will cry out for creation to collapse on them. Death can bring quick relief to ongoing agony. The idea of creation collapsing is an allusion to God’s judgment on idolatry in Hosea 10:8 and on the judgment for persecuting God’s people in Revelation 6:16.

The comparison of green and dry wood is an argument from lesser to greater. Jesus is the green tree that is alive. Israel is the dry wood that is dead. The argument is that if a living tree is put to death, how much more the dead, dry tree. If God does not spare his own Son, how much more will God not spare his judgment on unrepentant Israel? Dry wood burns much easier than green wood. Burning wood might be a reference to Isaiah 10:16–19 and Ezekiel 20:47–48.

This prophetic word of Jesus is sobering. What we decide about Jesus is serious business and we have to take seriously God’s judgment on unbelief.

Jesus Crucified

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. (Luke 23:32–33)

Jesus is not alone in his crucifixion. Two criminals or “evildoers” are with him. Matthew and Mark use the word “robber” or “bandit.” Jesus is reckoned among the lawless. As Isaiah 53:12 predicted he “was numbered with the transgressors,” a verse Jesus himself referred to in chapter 22.

The place of the crucifixion is called The Skull, a word from which we get our English word “cranium.” The name suggests that this was a hill protruding from the ground in the shape of a skull. Luke does not use the Aramaic word “Golgotha,” which the other gospels use, perhaps because of his audience. “Calvary” comes from the Latin translation of the Greek word. The location was outside the city wall, most likely where the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is located now in Jerusalem.

Luke moves quickly in his account. There is no mention of the drugged wine we see in Matthew and Mark or the nails we see in John. He simply states he was crucified.

Crucifixion was the harshest form of capital punishment. Only slaves and foreigners were crucified, not Roman citizens. Crucifixion was designed to be a deterrent, creating fear so that order could be maintained. Usually the criminal carried the crossbeam to the place of execution. The main stake would already be fixed in ground. The condemned person was bound to a crossbeam by rope or nails and the beam raised by forked poles and either fastened to the upright pole or dropped into a slot at the top of the upright beam, forming either a “T” or “r”. A sign specifying the crime hung around the accused to publicly announce the crime. Death came by suffocation through exhaustion or by loss of blood and body fluids.

The brutal nature of crucifixion shows us how ugly our sin really is, the evilness of sin unmasked, raw, and naked without dressing it up in any fashion like we normally do. It forces us to look at the harsh reality of our waywardness and realize the depth that God went to when he took our sin upon himself and died our death.

Luke also makes it clear that the innocent Jesus was crucified in the middle of two criminals—one on the left, one on the right. Perhaps this is a reminder that the cross must always remain in the center of our lives.

And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And they cast lots to divide his garments. (Luke 23:34)

Amazingly Jesus offers a prayer of forgiveness. Only Luke includes this detail. At the height of his agony Jesus is still focused on others. Like Stephen in Acts 7 Jesus prays for his accusers and executioners, although the Romans have not yet been mentioned. Jesus does what he preaches and intercedes for his enemies. “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Luke 6:27–28). Forgiveness is at the heart of the gospels. Forgiveness is the heart of God. God wants to forgive and provides the means to forgive – his own son.

Luke offers a quick note about casting lots for Jesus’ garments, a reference to Psalm 22: “they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.” (Psalm 22:18)

We know from Matthew and Mark this was done by the soldiers and was a common practice at crucifixions. This tells us that Jesus died unclothed, humiliated and shamed. “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.” (Gal 3:13)

Mocking – Saving Yourself

There are three people or groups of people that mock and ridicule Jesus on the cross, echoing the words of Psalm 22:7-8:

**All who see me mock me;
they make mouths at me; they wag their heads;
He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him;
let him rescue him, for he delights in him!** (Ps 22:7-8)

The first group of people to mock Jesus is the Jewish leaders:

And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” (Luke 23:35)

The people are not severe but they are not supportive. However, the rulers, the Jewish leaders, scoff and mock Jesus as God’s Anointed, the Messiah. They sneer and turn up their noses. They tempt Jesus like Satan did in the wilderness. They think they have gotten rid of Jesus, but they haven’t a clue.

The second group to join in the mocking is the Roman soldiers:

The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.” (Luke 23:36-38)

Like Pilate the soldiers understand the term “Messiah” as a king. Pilate had hung a sign on the cross to this effect, saying that Jesus is the King of the Jews, written in Greek, Latin, and Aramaic.

The third party to mock Jesus is one of the criminals crucified next to Jesus: “One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!’” (Luke 23:39)

This criminal rails or “blasphemes” Jesus. The irony is that the righteous one dies while being taunted by the unrighteous. Each of the three parties taunts Jesus to save himself and the criminal selfishly and callously asks Jesus to save him. Jesus does not save himself. Rather, he dies in order that he might save us.

The Repentant Criminal

The other criminal, however, has a different perspective towards Jesus and actually defends him:

But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” (Luke 23:40-41)

The actions of this other criminal are unique to Luke and along with the word to the mourning women is a major feature of our text today. Matthew and Mark have both criminals mocking Jesus. Perhaps this criminal started out mocking but after watching and listening he repented. He rebukes the mockers and calls his fellow criminal to fear God. He proclaims Jesus’ innocence like Herod and Pilate. Six times Jesus is said to be innocent, of doing nothing wrong.

After speaking to his fellow criminal, the repentant criminal speaks to Jesus:

And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:42-43)

The repentant criminal is the only one to call Jesus by name. He is embracing Jesus personally. He is confessing Jesus as the Christ and believing that he has the power to forgive. The irony is that “Some saw Jesus raise the dead, and did not believe. The robber sees Him being put to death, and yet believes”¹

Luke describes the reactions of various bystanders—mourning, watching, mocking, sneering, blaspheming, and confessing. These are a summary of how the world reacts to Jesus.

The repentant criminal asks Jesus to remember him when Jesus takes the throne in his kingdom. He believes that Jesus is a king. He might be referring to the present but more likely he is thinking of the future, when Jesus returns in power with the righteous.

However, Jesus tells the believing criminal that he will not have to wait. Rather something will happen today, he will be with Jesus today in Paradise. The meaning of Paradise is much debated. The word refers to a garden, a sanctuary. It is a word used in Genesis for Eden. Paul tells the Corinthians that he went there in the Spirit in 2 Corinthians 12:4. In Revelation 2, Jesus tells the church at Ephesus that the tree of life is located here. Paradise may not refer to heaven or the final consummation but a heavenly realm where the righteous are gathered. N.T. Wright suggests that Paradise is the “beginning of a journey.” It “is not the final destination: it is a beautiful resting place on the way there,”²

The important thing for the criminal is that he will be with Jesus and be with him immediately. This is a word of comfort and assurance to a forgiven man waiting to die. Paul tells us “we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). The word of judgment Jesus speaks to the mourning woman is balanced with a word of incredible grace.

The criminal offers us a wonderful truth: anyone can come to Christ at any time. No matter where we have been and no matter what we have done we can receive forgiveness and the hope of Paradise. The love of Christ trumps all of our sin and nothing can separate us from that love. As the offertory song this morning reminds us, the cross is how loves wins and what we can become because of Jesus.

In his poem *The Agony*, George Herbert suggest that the passion of Christ and the cross is ultimately what explains sin and love:³

Who would know Sin, let him repair
Unto mount Olivet; there shall he see
A man so wrung with pains, that all his hair,
His skin, his garments bloody be.
Sin is that press and vice, which forceth pain
To hunt his cruel food through ev’ry vein.

Who knows not Love, let him assay
And taste that juice, which on the cross a pike
Did set again abroad, then let him say
If ever he did taste the like.
Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,
Which my God feels as blood; but I, as wine.

Herbert explains that the cross was like a winepress. For Jesus, this press squeezed out his blood. But we drink it as wine. And that is what the communion cup represents—the blood of the new covenant shed for the forgiveness of sin that we drink as wine. The cross demonstrates the enormity of our sin and the magnitude of God's love.

1. Darrell Bock, *Luke Volume 2*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 1856.
2. David Jeffery, *Luke* (BrazosPress, Grand Rapids, 2012), 276.
3. George Herbert, *The Complete English Poems*, (Penguin Books, London, 1991), 33-34.

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