



A DIVINE DEATH

SERIES: THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE

Luke 23:44–56

85th Message

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March 22, 2015

Since the first of the year we have been on a slow journey with Jesus to the cross. I have to confess that this is heavy and draining material. Every week for the past several weeks I have been thinking about the passion, contemplating the texts, and looking at famous paintings depicting the cross. Funny stories don't come to mind as I prepare messages. I feel like it has been Good Friday for about six weeks and I am ready for resurrection. Well, we are almost there.

The cross reminds us that death is uncomfortable and unsettling, even in the best of situations. But sudden or tragic death is jarring and uneven. We are left with many more questions than answers and are often left with unfinished business. Death of a human being is hard, but when we read about the death of the Son of God in the gospels it is a deep well to plumb. We know the outcome, but imagine those who were watching the events unfold and seeing all of their hopes dashed to pieces. Picking up from last week, Jesus is on the cross and about ready to die.

The Death of Jesus

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last. (Luke 23:44–46 ESV)

Luke makes note of three things as Jesus' life was coming to an end. First, the land grew dark because the sun failed, i.e. the lights went out. The crucifixion began at the third hour, or 9:00 a.m. according to Mark. Then from noon to 3:00 the scene at Calvary was shrouded in darkness.

Growing up in the Midwest I am very familiar with darkness in the middle of the day. Every spring the sky would fill with black storm clouds and we would run to the basement as a precaution to tornadoes touching down. We have no idea what caused the darkness as Jesus hung on the cross—an eclipse or a powerful Mediterranean wind. But certainly the darkness was not by chance. Creation is giving witness that something monumental is happening

Darkness and light are vivid images throughout Scripture. In Genesis we read: "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. . . . And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light" (Gen 1:2–3). Will God bring light out of the darkness of the cross?

Jesus is the light of the world. He is truth and salvation. But will the cross extinguish the light of Jesus? Was John right when he wrote: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1:5)

Darkness is also a judgment motif associated with the day of the Lord in the prophets (Amos 8:9; Joel 2:10, 2:30–31; Zeph 1:15). For example Joel says:

**Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
for the day of the LORD is coming; it is near,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness! (Joel 2:1–2)**

**And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth,
blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned
to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and
awesome day of the LORD comes. (Joel 2:30–31)**

Israel is in darkness and the Jewish leadership refuses to accept the light. Certainly, the cross foreshadows judgment coming on the nation just as Jesus told the daughters of Jerusalem on his way to the cross. The cross is a cosmic conflict between light and darkness. The cross is serious business and has eternal consequences.

The second event Luke records is the tearing of the curtain in the temple down the middle. Matthew and Mark mention this after Jesus dies. Luke mentions it here to put it together with the darkness event since both allude to judgment and change.

The curtain could refer to what protected the Holy of Holies or the curtain that separated the inner and outer courts. Most likely the reference is to the outer curtain since this curtain would be in public view, like the darkness.

The significance is that the cross brings an end to the temple as God's center of activity and a place of worship; an end to the old covenant and Israel as the people of God. Jesus is the new temple and inaugurates the new covenant. God's people will include all nations. After Pentecost God will dwell with his people through the Spirit.

The third event Luke records is Jesus' final cry with his last breath: "Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit." Jesus calls out in a "great voice" to his Father in contrast to the Jewish leadership who cried out to Pilate with a "great voice" for Jesus to be crucified (Luke 23:23). After this Jesus dies; he breathes out his last breath.

Jesus quotes Psalm 31:5, the prayer of a righteous sufferer who is praying for deliverance from his enemies and at the same time trusting God for the outcome. Jesus puts himself in God's hands, i.e. his care (John 10:29, Acts 4:28, 30; 1 Pet 5:6). Even as Jesus is dying in agony he trusts God for vindication and resurrection. Psalm 31 was later used in Judaism as an evening prayer for God's care and protection while one sleeps. Jesus is going to sleep.

Luke does not have the cry of dereliction we see in Matthew and Mark, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46, Mark 15:34). Rather Luke has Jesus saying three things from the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34); "today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43);

and “Father into your hands I commit my spirit.” These are words of forgiveness, eternal life, and trust in God. Jesus is in complete control, even on the cross. He continues to give his message of forgiveness and eternal life. And he entrusts himself to the Father right up to the end.

Reactions to the Death of Jesus

Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, “Certainly this man was innocent!” And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things. (vv. 47–49)

Luke now records three reactions to the death of Jesus. First there is the centurion who was in charge of the crucifixion, a leader of a hundred soldiers. When this centurion saw what happened and heard what Jesus said, he praised or “glorified” God and then made a confession. This is the fourth person to declare Jesus innocent—Pilate, Herod, one of the criminals, and now the centurion. The word “innocent” is actually righteous, a word Luke uses eleven times in the gospel and six times in Acts. Jesus is not only the innocent one, but also the Righteous One, an allusion to several Old Testament texts (Is 53:11, Jer 23:5, Zech 9:9) including Jeremiah 23:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land...And this is the name by which he will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.” (Jer 23:5–6)

The centurion’s confession is significant because it comes from a Gentile. Jesus healed a centurion’s son in chapter 7, and in Acts 10 we find another believing centurion by the name of Cornelius. Matthew and Mark have the centurion saying that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is who he said he is, the Righteous Branch, the King of the Jews, the Christ of God.

Second we see the reaction of those who had gathered to watch. They may have even included some who had cried out for Jesus to be crucified. When they “saw” the “sight,” same word in Greek, they beat or struck their breasts. This is a sign of mourning (Luke 18:13; Acts 2:37–38). The crowd is moved and might be seeking mercy. They return to where they were staying for the Passover.

Third, the ones who knew Jesus stood off at a distance, most likely a larger group than the eleven. Luke again makes special note of the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee, the women mentioned in chapter 8:1–3. These women were also seeing what was happening. The women will continue to play a prominent role in the proceeding events.

The cross is full of significance. Let me mention a few things.

First, Jesus is the Passover lamb. The context is Passover. At the first Passover a lamb was killed and the blood was sprinkled on the lintel and side-posts of the front door. As God passed over Egypt in judgment bringing death to the firstborn he passed over the houses marked with blood. Jesus is slaughtered as the Paschal lamb, the Lamb of God, and his blood is salvific.

Second, Jesus is an atoning sacrifice. God had given the Israelites the sacrificial system, whereby people could be forgiven. For hundreds of years the Jewish people had made sin and guilt offerings. This was engrained in them. This was the means to make restitution with God. The killing of an animal demonstrated the seriousness of the situation between God and the offender. “The worshipper brought the offering, laid his hand or hands on it and killed it. The priest then applied the blood (and) burnt some of the flesh.”¹ Again, the blood was very important because it was a symbol of life and was necessary for atonement.

We are reminded of Paul’s word: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). The Righteous One became sin so that we could become righteous people.

The flesh of the animal was not all burned in the sin offering. Rather the rest of the flesh of the animal was eaten, symbolizing that life came through the flesh of the sacrifice. Jesus was this sacrifice, a “fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:2). We remember the body and blood of Jesus in the Communion meal.

Third, Jesus is the scapegoat. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest took “two male goats for a sin offering” in order to atone for the sins of the Israelite community as a whole (Lev 16:5). One goat was to be sacrificed and its blood sprinkled in the usual way, while on the living goat’s head the high priest was to lay both his hands “and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—then to drive the goat away into the desert, and it would ‘carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place’” (v. 22). Jesus is both the sacrificed goat and also the scapegoat in that he bore our sins and carried them away; “As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us” (Ps 103:12). Peter writes: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Pet 2:24).

Fourth, Jesus reverses the disobedience of Adam. Through Adam sin entered into the world. Sin infected every person born. Sin is in our DNA. There was no human means to reverse this situation. But Jesus came as the second Adam and lived a life of a true human born in the image of God. Through one man came death and through one man came life. This is what Paul says in Romans 5.

Here is how Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*:

Here it is in a nutshell: Just as one person did it wrong and got us in all this trouble with sin and death, another person did it right and got us out of it. But more than just getting us out of trouble, he got us into life! One man said no to God and put many people in the wrong; one man said yes to God and put many in the right. (Rom 5:18–19 MSG)

When we believe in the death of Jesus, we are placed into him, crucified with Christ and alive to God, and become a part of a new humanity. Now we are freed to live as God intended us to live. The cross becomes the “tree of life.”

Fifth, the cross is there for all to see. When Jesus is dying everyone is looking at the cross. In the midst of all the mocking and ridiculing by the Jewish leaders, by the people, by the soldiers, and by one of the criminals, there are still those who see and believe. The confessions of the repentant criminal and the centurion tell us that the gospel is for anyone, anywhere, at any time. It does

not matter where you come from or where you have been. If we confess with our mouth and believe in our hearts we will be saved. Everyone has to look at the cross and decide.

“The cross is at once the most terrible event in human history and the most to be cherished, because without it redemption would be impossible.”²

The cross changes everything. Jesus is the fulfillment of every shadow and symbol in the Old Testament, the completion of Israel’s story and way of life. My message title this morning is “A Divine Death” but maybe we could also say “A Death Divine.”

The Burial of Jesus

Now there was a man named Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea. He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man, who had not consented to their decision and action; and he was looking for the kingdom of God. (Luke 23:50–51)

Luke gives us several details about this man Joseph. He was from the Jewish town of Arimathea, probably not far from Jerusalem because he has a tomb there. He was a member of the council, meaning the Sanhedrin and did not agree with what the council decided or did. Perhaps Joseph was not at the evening or morning trial. Nonetheless, Luke tells us that the council was not unanimous as Mark records.

But, what is most important about Joseph is his connection to the early chapters of Luke, specifically to Zechariah and Elizabeth, John the Baptist’s parents, and Simeon and Anna who were present when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple for their purification. Joseph is good and righteous and waiting for the kingdom of God. “Righteous” is a word that describes Elizabeth and Zechariah (1:6) and Simeon (2:25). Simeon was “waiting for the consolation of Israel” (2:25), Anna spoke to people “waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38), and now Joseph is “looking”—same word as “waiting”—for the kingdom of God. Plus, Simeon and Joseph are introduced in the same manner—“behold, there was a man by the name of Simeon”; “behold, there was a man by the name of Joseph.”

Luke is a well-crafted book. Luke begins and ends his gospel with devout and godly people who are looking, waiting for the Messiah and the kingdom of God. In the midst of a disobedient people, there is still a remnant that is seeking God. Matthew says Joseph is a disciple, although John adds that he was a secret disciple for fear of the Jews. Mark says that he was respected, meaning that he was of noble birth or noble character.

This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid. It was the day of Preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning. (Luke 23:52–54)

Jesus had been crucified. Therefore, according to Deuteronomy he had to be buried on the same day:

And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance. (Deut 21:22–23)

Joseph goes to Pilate and asks for the body of Jesus. All four gospels mention this interaction. It means that Jesus is really dead. Pilate views Joseph as a safe person and grants the request. Matthew and Mark tell us that it was becoming evening, somewhere between three to five in the afternoon. Sabbath was approaching and so the body had to be dealt with. All of this was happening very quickly.

Joseph takes the body of Jesus from the cross and wraps it in a linen shroud, thus making Joseph unclean. The body of Jesus was laid in a tomb, a space tunneled into the side of a rock with a very small entrance. This was Joseph’s tomb and had not been used. When Jesus was born he was wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger. Now he is wrapped in a linen cloth and laid in a tomb. John tells us that Joseph had help from Nicodemus and they anointed the body with 100 pounds of spices, an amount usually reserved for a king. Isaiah’s prediction is fulfilled:

**And they made his grave with the wicked
and with a rich man in his death,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth. (Is 53:9)**

The women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment. (Luke 23:55–56)

Once again the women from Galilee are mentioned. Many paintings depict these women helping to take Jesus from the cross. These women follow Joseph and see where Jesus is laid. Then they return to their lodging for the Sabbath and prepare spices and perfumes to take to the tomb after the Sabbath, which they can do now that they know the location of the tomb. These perfumes would help with the smell of the body and slow decomposition. This means that the women did not expect a resurrection. Next week, Bernard will contemplate the last sentence of verse 56 and what was happening between the burial and the resurrection.

I shared some thoughts regarding the significance of the cross. Now let me reflect on a couple of things for our everyday lives.

First, we need to leave our old nature in the tomb. Paul says:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20).

As believers, we have been crucified with Christ and buried with Christ and raised with Christ. We have been freed from our fallen nature. We no longer live but Christ lives in us. We are a new creation. But even though we are a new creation we still have our flesh and a hangover from Adam. And it is a daily struggle to leave the old person, the Adam nature, in the tomb. Our tendency is to resurrect this old person and breathe life back into this corpse. We want the old person to live rather than expire. Every time we see jealousy or anger or pride we need to remember that the old person is dead and belongs in the tomb.

Second, we participate in the cross daily. Paul writes that we are: **always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you” (2 Cor 4:10–12).**

What Paul is saying is that life comes out of death. There is a lot that happens to us that we don't want. There are lots of heartaches and disappointments when things go wrong and often we don't get to choose. The essence of a cross-centered life is to die to life on our terms, life the way we want life, life as possessions, power, and prestige. We surrender ourselves to the will of God, accept the difficulties, and like Jesus on the cross entrust ourselves to God, believing that he will bring resurrection. As we sang this morning, "the cross bids us come and die."

As you high school students go to King City next week things might happen that feel like death—being left out of a group of people, not being able to access the internet or receive text messages, a breakup of a relationship, getting sick, having it rain all week. To follow Jesus means letting these things go rather than holding onto them or being consumed with them, trusting that God has a greater purpose for you, and looking for how God will give you life and work through you for others.

For many years I took young adults to the Yucatan Peninsula where we would live in a small Mayan village for a week and help build a church building. On every trip someone would get sick, sometimes really sick. But in each case God brought life to that person and through that person in an amazing way. We always carry around the dying of Jesus so that the life of Jesus might be manifested in our mortal flesh.

The principle that life comes out of death is totally counter-intuitive but it is a principle for life and ministry. As a church leadership we are committed to this principle. Many churches operate on the basis of making things look grand and successful. But that isn't what the Bible tells us about how resurrection life happens. The Bible tells us that when things go wrong we trust God and wait for him to bring life. We believe that God can bring life into a hurting marriage, a difficult family situation, or a frustrating job situation. What the cross asks us everyday is: will we believe that God can bring life out of death?

1. John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, (IVP, Downers Grove), 137
2. David Jeffery, *Luke*, (Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, 2012), 266

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