

# The Cross

## Luke 23:26-49

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It's hard at times to be a pastor, particularly with all the expectations that are placed on you. I had an example of this recently as I pulled through the Starbucks just down the road from us. If you didn't know, Starbucks is closing thousands of stores and our local store is one of them. It's disappointing, but what can you do? The lady opened the drive-thru window to give me my coffee. I didn't know her but I asked her if it was true that they were closing. She said, "Yeah, and if you would have had more people from your church come here maybe we wouldn't be closing!" I wasn't aware that this was my responsibility!

I really enjoy speaking here at Bethel. This is a great church to speak to because you listen, and generally give me the sense you are with me. After 11 years, you don't intimidate me. I have to admit that I am totally intimidated speaking to you today. Not because of you but because of what we are talking about. That [Steve points to a large cross on stage].

That is a cross. It's crux in Latin. If you are a Christian, this is a precious symbol of our faith. It is precious and mysterious. Its sacredness is not because of its wood or shape but because of what happened there and who died there and why He died and what His death means for us all. There is no sermon that begins to adequately explain it. So I am intimidated by our subject today.

### Crucifixion

We are going to get into Luke 23, but the text assumes some things from the reader that were true in the first century but are not true today. It assumes that people understand what crucifixion is really all about. They did. We don't. They did because this was a regular occurrence in the Roman Empire. It is estimated that the Romans crucified 30,000 people a year. It was their favorite form of punishment and execution and they had mastered the art of its torture and death. The cross was their instrument of choice because it was a powerful deterrent for anyone considering defying Roman authority.

Here is how the cross worked: the victim would be forced to carry the cross beam (patibulum) to the place of execution. In order to maximize the effect, the Romans would take a circuitous route so that as many people as possible would see the victim on his way to death. Once they arrived, they would force the man to stretch his hands along the crossbeam and would nail each arm through the wrist or hand to the beam. The cross beam would be attached to the vertical piece (stipes) and the legs would be slightly bent and they would pound one nail through the feet. The whole cross with the victim would be hoisted into place and dropped into the support hole. The victim would feel for the first time what would be his death struggle. In order to take in a breath, he would have to lift his torso with his legs on the nail only to slowly slide down the cross. The need for air would force him up again and then slowly down. Up and down the cross, sliding, in Jesus' case, along His freshly flogged back, in order to get air. It was a cruel and horrific death. Some lingered as long as a week.

A medical doctor wrote about the effect of crucifixion on the Jesus' body:  
*As the arms fatigue, great waves of cramps sweep over the muscles, knotting them in deep, relentless, throbbing pain. With these cramps comes the inability to push Himself upward.*

*Hanging by His arms, the pectoral muscles are paralyzed and the intercostal muscles are unable to act. Air can be drawn into the lungs, but cannot be exhaled. Jesus fights to raise Himself in order to get even one short breath. Finally, carbon dioxide builds up in the lungs and in the blood stream and the cramps partially subside. Spasmodically He is able to push Himself upward to exhale and bring in the life-giving oxygen...Hours of this limitless pain, cycles of twisting, joint-rending cramps, intermittent partial asphyxiation, searing pain as tissue is torn from His lacerated back as He moves up and down against the rough timber; then another agony begins. A deep crushing pain in the chest as the pericardium slowly fills with serum and begins to compress the heart. It is now almost over—the loss of tissue fluid has reached a critical level—the compressed heart is struggling to pump heavy, thick, sluggish blood into the tissues—the tortured lungs are making a frantic effort to gasp in small gulps of air. The markedly dehydrated tissues send their flood of stimuli to the brain.* (Dr. Truman Davis, quoted in *The Murder of Jesus* by John MacArthur, p. 201)

If the dehydration or exhaustion didn't kill, suffocation would. Eventually you simply could not lift yourself to get a breath.

When Luke wrote about Jesus' crucifixion, this was an understood part of Roman occupation. However, it was viewed as so hideous and profane that people in polite company would not talk about the cross.

Last week we studied the trial of Jesus and the charade of justice it was. The trial concluded with Pilate acquiescing to the demands of the Jews and turning Jesus over for crucifixion. All four gospels tell the story similarly. Luke tells his as a series of threes. Three crosses. Three cries. Three converts.

*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.* (Luke 23:26)

### **Convert #1 – Simon of Cyrene**

Jesus was exhausted. The previous night he was in the Garden of Gethsemane and by His own words was emotionally overwhelmed to the point of death. He had been up all night. From there He was arrested, beaten and scourged. These crossbeams weighed up to a 100 pounds; it was no small weight for even a healthy man. So Simon from the North African town of Cyrene is just coming into town and happens on the procession. The soldiers see Jesus isn't going to make it and force Simon to carry the cross. How did they force him? Roman swords could be very convincing.

Why is Simon mentioned by name? Mark's Gospel, written to the church at Rome, lists the names of Simon's two sons, Rufus and Alexander. Later, Paul will write his letter to the Romans and says in 16:13, *Greet Rufus and his mother*. Known to the church at Rome were Rufus, Alexander, and their mother, the wife of this man who carried Jesus' cross.

What happened? We don't know the details, but apparently carrying a cross and following Jesus is a life-changing experience. Simon saw this whole thing close up. The result is that likely he, his wife and his sons are converted; they became friends with the Apostle Paul, and were pillars in the church at Rome. Taking up a cross and following Jesus will change your life. It did Simon's.

*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)

## Three Crosses

This particular crucifixion also included two other men. Luke says the two were criminals. Matthew tells us they were thieves; must have been serious thievery to be crucified for it. One is placed on Jesus' left and one on His right, which left Jesus in the middle.

Why is this significant? It is the fulfillment of prophecy. Isaiah 53:12 prophesied that the Messiah would be "numbered with the transgressors." Indeed He was, but not just these two; all sinners. Jesus died with sinners for sinners. He's not posturing like a politician; He suffers and dies with them. So these two thieves represent all humanity, but I would recommend seeing them as representing you. Jesus died with sinners and for sinners, which means Jesus died for me.

### Cry #1 – Forgive them!

The gospels record seven cries that Jesus made from the cross. Luke has three; here is the first: *And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."* (Luke 23:34)

Who was Jesus asking His Father to forgive? Certainly the soldiers who just nailed the Son of God to a cross. More broadly, all who were involved in His murder. Who killed Jesus? You could say the Jewish leaders. You could say the Romans. The right answer is, *I did*. You may say, *I wasn't there and I didn't do anything*. In reality, it was our sin that put Him there in the first place. As the hymn says, *It was my sin that held him there until it was accomplished*.

What makes these words so precious is that they show that even in a moment of severe pain and total injustice, it is Jesus' instinct to forgive and to intercede for us.

I saw video from the Olympics this week in which a Swedish wrestler was incensed at what he perceived to be an injustice by the judges costing him a shot at the gold. He went after the judges and when awarded the bronze, walked off the awards podium, dropped his bronze medal and stormed off. He felt he had been wronged and that justified his protests. Is it just the Swedes who get mad when they've been wronged? Is it just the Swedes who respond with bitterness or feelings of revenge? What do we want to do when we think we have been slighted even a little? We want to fight back. You might be there right now.

This is what makes Jesus' cry here so remarkable. *Forgive them; they don't know what they are doing*. Jesus isn't angry. He isn't bitter. Forgive them. Only God could say that.

How often do you think the Roman executioners heard that from a victim of crucifixion? I would imagine they were called every four letter word in the book, spit at, and damned by every god imaginable. Not Jesus. Isn't that one more thing to marvel at about Him? Rejoice that if Jesus can forgive the very men who nailed Him to a cross, then Jesus can forgive you and me as well.

*And they cast lots to divide his garments. 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!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"* (Luke 23:35-37)

We could add the three groups that mock him – the rulers, the soldiers and the thieves. He was literally being ridiculed on all sides. The religious rulers mock Him by saying, *If He is who He claims to be, then let's see Him get out of this one!* The soldiers also mocked Him.

No doubt they had heard about Jesus; He had paraded into Jerusalem like a king on a donkey just five days before. Now look at Him; He was helpless on the cross and they had personally put Him there. Cruel men love to mock.

*There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." (Luke 23:38)*

All four gospels tell of this inscription. It was written in Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew as Pilate instructed. Matthew tells us the Jewish leaders were unhappy with the wording, but Pilate didn't care. Did anybody realize the truth of that little inscription? They do now.

## **Convert #2 – The Thief**

*One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" 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 23:39-41)*

This is the famous thief on the cross. The other gospels suggest that both thieves were yelling at Him and then the one has a change of heart that Luke records. That thief turns to the other thief and tells him to shut his face because Jesus has done nothing wrong. How he knew this or concluded this, we don't know. What we do know is what he says to Jesus in verse 42: *And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."* This is his profession of faith. The thief became a follower of Jesus leading Jesus to say...

## **Cry #2 – Today you will be with me in Paradise**

Remember, Jesus is hanging on a cross by His hands and feet. He is gasping for air. He is dehydrated. Yet, Jesus is still on a mission. He is dying for millions, but He deals personally with the spiritual needs of the man next to Him. Time doesn't allow us to really chew on this, but let me just say that this teaches us a few things:

- 1. Salvation is particular.** In today's politically correct world Jesus would be criticized for suggesting the other thief wouldn't be in Paradise; that His belief system was inadequate in some way. Yet, Jesus only assures one thief of his salvation.
- 2. It's never too late.** All three are going to be dead within a few hours, yet this man was converted in his last hours. This gives us hope for loved ones who have not yet surrendered their lives to Jesus.
- 3. Today you will be with me.** The thief wasn't going to be reincarnated; he wasn't going into a soul sleep; death wasn't the end for him. That very day he would be with Jesus in Paradise. When a believer dies, it's instant Paradise WITH Jesus.
- 4. Consider what Jesus calls where they are going – Paradise.** It comes from a word meaning "garden." If the Son of God, who knows what eternity is like, uses the word *Paradise* to describe it, how wonderful must it be?

*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)*

### **Cry #3 – Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit**

Jesus was crucified around 9:00 in the morning. The sixth hour as they reckoned it was around noon. Darkness came over the land. This was no eclipse. It was the indication of divine judgment (darkness is a common picture of judgment in the Old Testament). This lasts for three hours until around 3:00 Jesus makes His third and final cry, *Father into your hands I commit my spirit*.

### **Convert #3 – The Roman Centurion**

*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. (Luke 23:47-48)*

He was the one presiding over the whole matter. A centurion was a man of great authority. You don't become a Roman centurion by being anyone's dummy. He heard all seven cries of Jesus from the cross. He saw the darkness. He saw His demeanor in suffering. He saw how He died. He felt the ensuing earthquake. His conclusion Luke says, is "This man was innocent!" Matthew tells us he said; "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54)

I don't know if this was saving faith or not, but clearly the Centurion came to Jesus' side and may very well have been saved through the experience.

Regardless, his response forces us to ask bottom line faith questions. Our answers are summarized by the responses of the two thieves. On the one hand there is disbelief and then also, mockery. If Jesus wasn't the Messiah, there is a lot to ridicule about Him. The unbelieving world does; who would be silly enough to think there was anything actually miraculous or supernatural about Him? Or as Bill Maher's upcoming movie is entitled, *Religulous* (*religion* combined with *ridiculous*). This is the human heart without saving faith. The other thief begins with mockery but ends up with faith. *Remember me when you come into your kingdom*. He is in Paradise today.

You might say, isn't there a third or fourth option? Can't we admire Him without getting too committed? Actually, no. The cross is a kind of fork in the road. It requires everyone to decide, *Who was this Jesus of Nazareth?* Criminal or Christ? Sinner or Son of God? The thief and the centurion had a change of heart, how about you? Are you ready to put your faith and hope for your salvation and eternity in Jesus and His death for your sin?

Christian, let me ask you, *Is the cross merely a trinket around your neck or a religious symbol?* Or is it precious because of who died there and why He died? We need the shadow of the cross every day to remind us of what this whole thing is about. We need to live the cross-centered life. Don't some of the things that dominate our priorities seem silly right now? The cross puts life in perspective. We need it every day.

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