

Tried and Crucified
Luke 23:26, 32-49

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March 25, 2018

Luke places us in the Garden of Gethsemane, as Jesus pleads with the Father to find another way, other than crucifixion, for the salvation and restoration of creation. Even as he pleads with the Father to remove the cup of suffering, the cup of the cross, from him, Jesus acknowledges that it is the Father's will that must be obeyed (22:42). Next, Judas betrays our Lord (22:47-53), and Jesus is arrested and led away (22:54). As predicted by Jesus, Peter denies him three times, just as the cock crows (22:55-62). Finally, Jesus is blindfolded, bludgeoned and bloodied, as they make mockery of his Messiahship (22:63-65).

Standing before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court, Jesus is questioned concerning his real identity, "If you are the Christ, tell us." Jesus admits that, indeed, he is the Son of God, the one who will be seated at the right hand of the power of God. The Sanhedrin is fully satisfied that he is, indeed, a blasphemer as he clearly claims to be the "Son of God" (22:66-71).

Jesus Before Pilate (Luke 23:1-7)

Jesus had already prophesied that he would be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes and given over to the Gentiles (9:22; 18:32). Fulfilling his very words, the Sanhedrin hands Jesus over to Pilate in order to persuade the Roman occupational government to do what the Jews were powerless to do—put Jesus to death.

As governor, Pilate has the power of life and death over the inhabitants of his province. In presenting the case against Jesus before the power of the Empire, the Jews take care to omit all religious accusations concerning blasphemy or Jesus' claiming to be the Christ. More precisely, the Jewish leaders bring three formal accusations against Jesus. He is:

(1) *misleading the nation*. This charge, more specifically, is an indication that Jesus is a troublemaker for the Empire, a catalyst in the development of an anti-Roman rebellion;

(2) *forbidding the payment of taxes to Rome*. This second accusation is an outright lie. Jesus actually said, "... render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (20:25); and,

(3) *calling himself the Messiah (Christ), the king*. He did, in fact, claim to be the Christ, but not in the way the people assumed. During his triumphal entry, the people shouted, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord" (Luke 19:38), demonstrating their hope that Jesus was a political Christ who would lead the revolt against Rome.

With Jesus standing before him, and having heard the three accusations against the less-than-threatening prisoner, Pilate asks, in a straightforward way, “Are You the King of the Jews?” Jesus’ reply can be translated, “It is as you say.” The parallel text in the Gospel of John clarifies Jesus’ response to the Roman governor, “You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice” (John 18:37). Jesus makes clear that he is a king, but that his kingdom is not of this world (John 18:28-37).

Pilate’s quick declaration that there were no grounds for charging Jesus makes clear that, for anyone with a sense of justice, Jesus was completely innocent. The Jewish leaders, however, “play” Pilate. They realized that the governor’s number one task is to prevent revolution in a place that is, clearly, a political hotbed. They, therefore, redoubled their efforts by asserting that Jesus “stirs up the people” (23:5). In actuality, the people that are stirred are the privileged Jewish leaders who want to lose neither status nor control as Jesus confronts them with the real reign of God.

Knowing that Jesus was a Galilean, and hearing that Herod was in the area of Jerusalem, Pilate “passes the buck,” hoping that Herod Antipas can lend a hand by examining this innocent man (23:6-7).

Jesus Before Herod (Luke 23:8-12)

Herod is more than happy to meet Jesus, for he previously sought to see him (9:9), and it had been reported that he even wanted to kill Jesus (13:31-33). This account of Jesus appearing before Herod Antipas is unique to Luke alone. While Herod is really hoping to see a sign, a miracle, Jesus refuses to perform on command. In fact, as Herod interrogates Jesus at length, Luke reminds us that Jesus “answered him nothing” (23:9).

I have always found verse 9 quite perplexing. Why does Herod continue to question Jesus “at some length” if Jesus refuses to answer? Why would you ask the tenth question if the accused, Jesus, had not feared you enough to answer the first? Clearly, through the silence of Jesus, Luke is making clear that Jesus—not Herod nor Pilate—has control of the “court.”

Since Jesus refuses to entertain Herod or even respect him enough to reply, Herod makes mockery of this would-be Messiah, dressing him in a “gorgeous robe” and sending him back to Pilate. With the placement of the splendid robe, Herod shows the contradiction: though seemingly clothed in power, Jesus is powerless. All the while, the Jewish leaders continue to accuse Jesus, refusing to let him slip through the cracks as he is transported between Roman authorities (23:11).

Have you ever noticed the oddity of verse 12? “Now Herod and Pilate became friends with one another that very day; for before they had been enemies with each other.” As Professor Fred Craddock declares, “What a basis for friendship”—both making mockery of our Lord. (See also Acts 4:25-28.)

Pilate Before the People (Luke 23:13-26)

Luke makes clear that Jesus has been both questioned and examined, only to find that neither Pilate nor Herod have found any reason to consider Jesus worthy of the death penalty (23:13-15). Pilate, therefore, intends to punish Jesus and simply release him (23:16).

Verse 17 describes the practice by which the Jews were allowed to welcome one prisoner back to freedom, a prisoner of their choice. Rather than releasing Jesus, an innocent man, the Jews choose a real insurrectionist, a real rebel, for release (23:17-19). Do you see the irony of their choice? In a complete act of hypocrisy, the Jews demand that a rebel, one guilty of the very crimes of which they had falsely accused Jesus, find freedom, while Jesus, who both rejected violence and posed no threat to Rome, would be led to the cross by their “cat-calls.” Pilate is now powerless before the will of the people if he wants to maintain an orderly kingdom. Garland describes the essence of the situation when he writes, “. . . Pilate will sentence to death a man he declares to be innocent and release a man declared to be a rebel and murderer for no apparent reason other than to appease a rabid crowd.” Pilate, therefore, appears to be nothing more than a pawn in the hands of those he is supposed to rule; justice breaks down.

In the midst of the crowd’s clamor for Jesus’ crucifixion, we cannot miss that God himself is still in control. On one level, the cross seems to be the result of a riotous mob. On another level, however, the reader understands that life will come through death, and glory through suffering. In Acts 2:23, Luke states plainly, “This Man was delivered over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death, nailing Him to the cross.”

Jesus on the Cross (Luke 23:32-38)

While we live in a culture that demands both gory details and a “play-by-play” of pain, the Gospel writers used the greatest brevity in describing Jesus’ sufferings. The brevity in their treatment of his agony should serve as a warning to all of us that we must not create a melodrama around Jesus’ sufferings in order to satisfy the bloodthirsty longings of a curious crowd.

During the crucifixion, we observe:

(1) Jesus was crucified between two criminals (23:33).

(2) Jesus calls for the Father to forgive those who wronged him, for they do so in ignorance. The normal cry of one being crucified is for vengeance against his executioners (see Psalm 69:22-28). Praying that his persecutors be forgiven, however, Jesus is actually modeling what he taught his disciples to do—to love their enemies and pray for those who abuse them (Luke 6:27-28; see also 11:4).

(3) They cast lots to divide up Jesus’ clothing. To increase the embarrassment of the condemned, the victim was stripped of clothing. Fulfilling ancient scripture (Psalm 22:18), the executioners “pitched pennies” for ownership of his garments—a bonus for a hard day’s work.

(4) Jesus was abused by a full cast of characters. The bystanders looked on, and the rulers sneered, declaring that though he could save others, he did not seem able to save himself. The soldiers offered sour wine in order to moisten his lips and prolong the agony (23:36). And even one of the criminals crucified beside him joined in the humiliation of Jesus by declaring, “If You really were the Christ, you would save both Yourself and us” (23:37).

(5) One of the thieves repents and is promised Paradise. The “honest criminal” confesses that he and his comrade are receiving justice, for they are guilty as accused. Jesus, however, is recognized by this thief as both innocent and possessing kingly power (23:40-42). The thief, moreover, actually calls Jesus by name (a rare instance when he is simply called “Jesus” in Luke), not the usual “Lord” or “Sir.” He requests that Jesus remember him when he comes into his kingdom. He is not seeking an earthly release, but, rather, an eternal domain.

What could have possibly led this criminal who was being crucified to conclude that this rabbi being crucified beside him would have the power to save him for all eternity? Perhaps it was Jesus’ prayer of forgiveness for those who were crucifying him. With full confidence, Jesus promises the kind thief that “today you will be in Paradise.” The word for Paradise was used for gardens or “pleasure parks” that only a king would possess (2 Chronicles 33:20; Nehemiah 2:8; Ecclesiastes 2:5). The word is also used for the perfect garden where Adam and Eve lived in God’s bounty before the entrance of sin (Genesis 2:8-10). Luke is making clear that through the crucifixion, Jesus is opening the gates to Paradise (see Revelation 2:7). David Garland comments, “Jesus is the first to enter Paradise and makes it accessible to sinners.”

The Cosmos Before God (Luke 23:44-49)

Herod was certainly disappointed that he did not receive a sign during his inquisition of Jesus. If he had stayed around to behold the crucifixion, however, he would have found the cosmos itself declaring the agony of the death of its creator. Darkness covers the whole land (23:44). This darkness, moreover, happens from noon until three, the brightest time of day. As Jesus declares the committal of his spirit into the hands of the Father, moreover, the curtain that separated the holy place from the most holy place is ripped in two. Even as the Holy of Holies is made accessible with the opening of the curtain, we are to understand that salvation, likewise, has been made available through the death of the Son of God. God is now accessible to all who will call upon his name in repentance.

The Centurion Before Jesus (Luke 23:47-49)

Luke records three different reactions to Jesus’ death from various viewpoints. The first reaction comes from the centurion who sees the cosmic protest in the darkness of noonday and declares Jesus to be “righteous.” Interestingly, in Luke’s second volume, the “righteous one” becomes an identifier of Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 3:14-15; 7:52; 22:14).

The second reaction to be recorded is that of the crowd who “returned, beating their breasts” (23:48). The term “beating their breasts” is interpreted as a sign of repentance, an admission that they had called for the crucifixion of an innocent man. The crowd laments.

The third reaction concerns those who “knew him” (23:49). This is probably a reference to both relatives and friends of Jesus who come from Galilee. Perhaps they stood at a distance out of reverence for Jesus, or they wanted to avoid the mockers and spectators. Perhaps, they serve to confirm Psalm 38:11, where we read, “My friends and companions avoid me because of my wounds; my neighbors stay far away.”

Conclusion

God works in wondrous ways. He chooses to save humanity through the shame of crucifixion. The Israelites could have never foreseen that God's promises would ultimately be fulfilled by a crucified Christ (Messiah). They knew well what Moses had said about folks who find themselves on a cross, "Cursed is he who hangs on a tree" (see Deuteronomy 21:23 and Galatians 3:13). A few decades later, Paul reflects on God's plan of redemption as he writes to the church at Corinth, "For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18). Quoting the prophet Isaiah, he continues, "For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside" (1 Corinthians 1:19, quoting Isaiah 29:14).