

63. The Crucifixion of Christ

Luke 23:26-49

Luke: A Walk Through the Life of Jesus

We have been following the Lord Jesus as He has walked over the hills and valleys of Israel, and now we come to the last valley, the day of His crucifixion. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, knew instinctively that there was something different about Jesus. Christ had answered Pilate's question honestly and face to face, and He proclaimed that He was a king (John 18:37), an extraordinary statement to a man in a position of authority under Caesar. There could not be two kings in the Roman Empire. It took extreme bravery to say such a thing to Pilate.

It was the governor's custom at the Feast of Passover to release a criminal. Pilate assumed that, if he gave the people a choice between Jesus and Barabbas, a man found guilty of insurrection and murder, then they would choose Jesus. He was wrong. The chief priests and the elders went through the crowd and persuaded them to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus crucified (Matthew 27:20). It is normal to trust our spiritual leaders, so the people followed their dictates.

I can only imagine the horror of the disciples and His mother, Mary, in the crowd that morning as the religious leadership was going among them, telling them to shout for Barabbas rather than Jesus. They surely screamed at the top of their voices, hoping for the name of Jesus to rise above the shouts of Barabbas, but it was the name Barabbas that was heard the loudest from the mob.

It is interesting to note that Jesus was never declared guilty by Pontius Pilate. The Lord was delivered over to them with Pilate's washing his hands of the affair, thinking that he could absolve himself before God of his responsibility. After the release of Barabbas, Pilate had Jesus scourged.

The Humiliation and Scourging of Jesus

Luke does not comment about the scourging, so to get a full picture of the beatings and humiliation, we draw our information from the other Gospels. In his book, *The Day Christ Died*, author Jim Bishop has this to say about scourging;

Roman scourging was called the "halfway death" because it was supposed to stop this side of death. It was not administered in addition to another punishment. The two "thieves" who would die on this day were not scourged. And the Jewish law—*Mithah Arikhta*—forbade any manner of prolonged death for condemned criminals, and exempted any who were to die from the shame of being scourged." The Roman lictor used a circular piece of wood, to which were attached several strips of leather. At the end of each strip, he sewed a chunk of bone or a small piece of iron chain. This instrument was called a flagellum.¹

The flagellum had anywhere from three to nine strips of leather. Shards of glass, broken pottery, bone splinters or nails, and other metal items were attached to the end of each strip. Most victims of scourging were stripped naked and beaten by one or possibly two soldiers as the victim was

¹ Jim Bishop, *The Day Christ Died*. Published by Harper SanFrancisco, Page 232.

tied to a post with his back towards the Roman soldiers. The flagellum would have torn chunks of flesh off his back, laying it open. It was common for the wounds to cut deep into the kidneys. Some victims died from extreme shock.

Mel Gibson's movie, "*The Passion of the Christ*," did not exaggerate the horror of what it was like to be scourged. When the scourging was finished, the Roman cohort of 480 to 600 soldiers that were garrisoned there had their opportunity to "make sport" of Him. Matthew tells us, "**The governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him**" (Matthew 27:27).

For the second time, we read about Jesus being struck again and again in the face. The first time was in the courtyard outside Caiaphas' house (Matthew 26:67); the second time was in the Praetorium with the whole company of soldiers. They spat in His face and hit Him repeatedly on the head with a staff (Matthew 27:30), taking turns, also, to hit Him with their fists (John 19:3). Jesus was greatly weakened by the blood loss from the scourging and beating. He is further humiliated by a crown of thorns being jabbed into his head, causing further blood loss.

Here, we see a picture of man behaving at his worst to the Creator of the Universe. The whole company of soldiers were laughing and jeering at the humiliation of the One Who is the true King. They clothed Him in a scarlet or purple cloak, the color of a king, and put a reed into His right hand instead of a scepter. They then kneeled before Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews," mimicking the "Hail, Caesar!" that was spoken to declare allegiance to the Roman emperor, while at the same time spitting upon Him. With all the open wounds in His back, they then pulled the purple robe away, causing further blood loss, before putting His own clothes back on Him (Matthew 27:27-31).

Question 1) What motivated the Roman soldiers to act in such a cruel way toward Jesus? Why would they put on a mock coronation?

Typically, the Roman soldiers would then tie the cross beam, the *Patibulum*, usually weighing at least one hundred pounds, to the victim's shoulders. At the front of the procession to the place of crucifixion, one carried a sign that was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek, "**This is Jesus, the King of the Jews**" (John 19:20). This would give an indication of His "crime." The chief priests objected to this statement, demanding that it be changed to read, "He said He was the king of the Jews," but by this time, Pilate was so disgusted with them, he answered, "**What I have written I have written**" (John 19:22). A guard of four soldiers led by a centurion would lead Christ out to the public place where He would be crucified. They would part the garments of Jesus among themselves as a "benefit of the job."

The *Via Dolorosa*

The route that day was a circuitous route, for Rome wanted as many people as possible to see an example of those that stood against the Roman empire. John tells us that Christ was taken to the Place of a Skull, which was called Calvary, or *Golgotha* in Aramaic (John 19:17). Some say that the place was so called because of skulls of other victims were left lying there, but this is unreasonable when one considers the Jewish passion for cleanliness and holiness of the land. It

was more than likely a hillside that was shaped like a skull. Crucifixions took place on major thoroughfares and outside city gates so that many people would see and fear the same fate. The Lord was severely weakened by having no sleep, scourged, beaten in the face by the whole company of Roman soldiers, humiliated, spat upon, and hit about the head with a staff. Jesus needed help to carry the cross as His body was already weakened by the loss of blood. Victims of crucifixion would not usually undergo other punishment prior to their execution.

²⁶As they led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. ²⁸Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' ³⁰Then " 'they will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!" ³¹For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" ³²Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left (Luke 23:26-33).

In His weakened condition, the one-hundred-pound crossbeam, i.e. the *patibulum*, was too much for Jesus to carry, so the Roman centurion compelled a traveler just arriving into Jerusalem for Passover, Simon from Cyrene, North Africa, to carry it. On the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Sorrows, Jesus was concerned for the women who were crying and wailing for Him. Christ told the mourners to wail for themselves and for the judgment that will follow. In a proverb (vs. 30-31), He compared Himself to a tree that is green and full of life. Righteous green Jesus was not a natural object to be burned in the fire of judgment, but the dry, lifeless nation of Israel that had rejected mercy and grace, would have to face the fires of judgment by the Roman government in 70 A.D. It is interesting to note that God protected His Church by using the persecution of the disciples to force the early believers out from Jerusalem before its destruction (Acts 8:1).

The Crucifixion of Christ

When they reached Calvary, Simon threw down the crossbeam, and Matthew tells us that they offered Jesus wine mixed with gall. Mark wrote that the bitter substance also had myrrh, but when He tasted it, He refused it and spat it out (Mark 15:23). This substance mixed into the wine was both nauseous and narcotic, i.e. a sedative to enable the soldiers to hold His arms down for Him to be nailed more easily. He wanted nothing that would dull His senses at that crucial time. When He refused the mild narcotic, they pierced His hands and feet. He would "taste death" for every man (Hebrews 2:9). He would not fight those trying to nail His hands and feet, He willingly laid His hands down. This was prophesied by King David nearly 1000 years previously in the Jewish Scriptures:

¹⁹You know how I am scorned, disgraced and shamed; all my enemies are before you. ²⁰Scorn has broken my heart and has left me helpless; I looked for sympathy, but there was none, for comforters, but I found none. ²¹They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst (Psalm 69:19-21).

King David foresaw this drama prophetically approximately 1000 years previously when he wrote Psalm 22. Some believe that Christ spoke the whole psalm while on the cross. We know that Jesus recited part of it. Psalm 22 speaks so clearly of the Son of David, starting with words that Jesus spoke on the cross:

1My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?... ⁶But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. ⁷All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: ⁸"He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him."... ¹²Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me. ¹³Roaring lions tearing their prey open their mouths wide against me. ¹⁴I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me. ¹⁵My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. ¹⁶Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, **they have pierced my hands and my feet.** ¹⁷I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. ¹⁸They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing (Psalm 22:1, 6-8, 12-18).

Question 2) In the above psalm, what similarities do you see to the description of the death of Jesus?

When I have spoken to Jewish people about this prophecy in the Scriptures, they find it hard to believe that it is written in the Jewish *Tenakh*, what we call the Old Testament.

The Apostle John wrote that Thomas would not believe unless he saw the nail prints in Christ's hands (John 20:25). This tells us that Christ was not lashed there as some had been. The spikes were driven through His wrists into the cross beam. The whole weight of His body was painfully hanging from his wrists. If the palms had received spikes, the flesh would have torn with the weight of his body. The cross was then lifted and dropped into a socket in the ground causing many of His bones to go out of joint, just as Psalm 22:14 had prophesied. More than likely, a single nail was driven through both feet, through the Achilles' tendons. From that point, every breath was difficult. A *titulus*, or small sign, stating the victim's crime was nailed to the cross above the head.

To prolong the torture and pain, the Romans put a little piece of wood under the feet, called a Sedile, so that the crucified person could put some weight on the wood and draw another breath. To add to the agony, His back had been flayed and had many open wounds, so every time He pushed down on the Sedile to draw another breath, his back would endure terrible pain as he moved against the cross. From every side of the cross that one looked, we could see blood dripping, His hands, feet, head, back. His face was barely recognizable due to the beatings about the face and head. No wonder Isaiah had prophesied, "**Just as there were many who were appalled at him—his appearance was so disfigured** beyond that of any man and his **form marred beyond human likeness**" (Isaiah 52:14 Emphasis mine). Here's how the New Living Translation translates it: "Many were amazed when they saw him beaten and bloodied, so disfigured one would scarcely know he was a person" (Isaiah 52:14 NLT). Luke writes about the sneering going on from the third hour, 9 a.m. till midday, the sixth hour:

³⁴Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. ³⁵The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One." ³⁶The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." ³⁸There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. ³⁹One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴²Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." ⁴⁴It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, ⁴⁵for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two (Luke 23:34-45).

The Seven Last Sayings of Christ on the Cross

The last things a person speaks before he dies are usually very important things that they want to convey. There are seven last sayings of Christ. We will examine these sayings in order:

1) "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Question 3) Who was Jesus forgiving because of their ignorance?

This first saying is directed to the soldiers guarding Him as they divided His clothing among themselves. John writes that the four soldiers guarding Him cast lots for his clothing in fulfillment of another prophecy (John 19:23-24; Psalm 22:8). Most pictures of Christ on the cross usually show an undergarment over his loins, but in reality crucified criminals were usually hung naked for reason of humiliation and to dissuade others from criminal paths. It seems that as soon as the cross had settled into its socket, the chief priest and elders mocked Him. He did not retaliate or curse or wail. In the midst of His pain, He did the opposite. Amazingly, He forgave the soldiers, even as they were casting lots for His clothing. It was not their business to question their leaders. They were given a job to do, and they were doing it in ignorance of Christ's identity. They did not see the enormity of what they had just done, i.e. that God was the One being crucified.

2) "I tell you the truth today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

Mark's Gospel tells us that, "Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him" (Mark 15:32). At the beginning, both of the men that were crucified with Christ insulted Him in the hope that, if He were the Son of God, they could goad Him into coming down from the cross and help them, too. Later, Luke tells us that one was silent while the other continued in hurling insults: ³⁹One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴²Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your

kingdom." ⁴³Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:39-43).

Question 4) Jesus told the criminal that he would be with Him that day in paradise. On what basis would this man go to paradise, do you think? What do you think this criminal saw in Jesus that convinced him that He was, indeed, the Christ?

This common criminal had seen Jesus being badly treated by all that were witnessing the crucifixion, viz. the high priest, the elders, and the common people. He had also witnessed His forgiveness to the soldiers who had driven spikes into His wrists and feet. The pain the criminal was experiencing was nothing to what he knew Christ was enduring because of the scourging and the crown of thorns on His head.

He must have heard at some time about the promise of the Messiah, one who would usher in the Kingdom of God. He realized that there was something genuine about the claims of Jesus and that He was "the One" who was promised. Even though his understanding may have been very basic, he spoke the words, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42).

Repentance and faith are expressed in those words. There was no time to do good works. There was not a creed spoken. No priest had told him of certain things that he must say or do to enter the kingdom. He was told that he would be with Christ in paradise that very day. There is no such thing as purgatory. It is by God's grace alone that we are accepted into God's family. "The cross is the resting place for sin, the tomb for self and the throne for our fears" (Harold St John).

God is not willing that any should perish but that all may come to repentance and faith in Christ. The words that we say are not as important as what is within our hearts. He sees our heart, everything that is expressed, and He knows us better than we know ourselves. Is there sorrow for our sin? Do we see our need of a Savior? By God's grace alone, this man, was brought to humility of heart and repentance, and, if you are willing, God will do the same for you. Call upon the Lord while He is near!

3) "He said to His mother, 'Woman, behold your son!' Then He said to the disciple, 'Behold your mother!'" (John 19:26-27).

We don't hear of Joseph, Mary's husband, being around during Jesus' ministry. Joseph had obviously died at some point. To care for Mary was Jesus' responsibility due to Christ's being the firstborn of the family. He did not pass on responsibility to His half-brothers. He asked John, the disciple whom He loved, to take care of Mary, His mother. He does not call her mother, but woman, lest people attribute divinity to her. She had already acknowledged her need of a Savior for her sin (Luke 1:47).

At midday, the sixth hour by Jewish reckoning, darkness covered the whole land. The laughter, comedy, and scorn were over at this point, for God Himself shows up. Yes, the Lord who "dwells in unapproachable light" (1 Timothy 6:16), also visits in thick darkness. "He made **darkness** his covering, his canopy around him-- the dark rain clouds of the sky" (Psalm 18:11). In another place, Scripture says of God, "Clouds and **thick darkness** surround Him;

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne” (Psalm 97:2). When God showed up at Mount Sinai, Moses wrote of Him, “You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire to the very heart of the heavens: **darkness**, cloud and thick gloom” (Deuteronomy 4:11). The very air was pungent with the presence of the Holy One, who drew near bringing judgment for sin on His Son instead of us. It was during that time of darkness, this writer believes, that every sin and act of rebellion while on this planet, past present and future, were laid on Christ: "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:24). In the midst of the darkness after midday, Jesus spoke again:

4) "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" - which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34).

Question 5) Why would Christ feel forsaken of God?

Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21). On the cross, the sin of the world was placed upon Christ. He became the sin-bearer for the whole human race. Scripture tells us that God is too pure to look upon evil (Habakkuk 1:13), so for the first time in eternity, fellowship between God the Son and God the Father was broken as the Father turned away from Christ. As death drew near, He spoke for the fifth time:

5) “I am thirsty” (John 19:28).

We cannot tell what Christ is experiencing at this point. Some have said that He is beginning to suffer in His body what the rich man experienced in hell (Luke 16:24) upon death. The rich man was thirsty and desired Lazarus to dip his finger into water to cool his tongue. Christ’s body was shutting down, and as Psalm 22:15 states, His tongue was sticking to His mouth, that being a normal process of crucifixion. Jesus had now drunk the cup of God’s judgment to the full (Luke 22:42), so he looked for some relief to be able to shout His next words of victory. This time there was no myrrh, no narcotic; it was sour wine on a sponge that was put to His mouth. “A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips (John 19:29). It was the hyssop plant that was lifted to His lips, the same plant that was dipped in the blood of a lamb and used to strike the doorposts and lintels at the Passover from Egypt (Exodus 12:22).

To stop His tongue from sticking to the roof of His mouth, as Psalm 22 says, He took a drink from the sponge on the hyssop. Matthew and Mark record that Jesus shouted out something from the cross before giving up His spirit: “And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit” (Matthew 27:50). He pushed one more time on the wedge of wood under His feet, and He shouted loudly His next words. It is John who tells us what He shouted in a victorious shout:

6) “It is finished” (John 19:30).

Question 6) What do you think Jesus was expressing with His words, “It is finished?”

The Greek word, *tetelestai*, is translated into English as “It is finished.” It means to make an end of, to complete or accomplish something, not merely ending it, but bringing it to perfection or its destined goal. It also means to pay in full as in a tax or tribute.² This was a cry of triumph! It is accomplished, paid in full, no debt remaining to God’s people. They are free! No wonder He shouted. He wanted the world to know that the debt of sin had been paid. God’s judgment and justice had been atoned. The true Day of Atonement had come!

7) “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46).

⁴⁶Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last. ⁴⁷The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man." ⁴⁸When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. ⁴⁹But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things (Luke 23:46-49).

After He had said these words, His body went limp. His head hung down, and He gave up His Spirit. Even the hardened centurion, when he saw how Christ died, was convinced, “Truly this was the Son of God!” (Matthew 27:54).

Question 7) What supernatural phenomenon occurred at the crucifixion and why?

The first supernatural phenomenon was that darkness came over all the land from the sixth hour to the ninth hour (Matthew 27:45). Passover always occurred on a full moon, so a solar eclipse was out of the question during a full moon, and even if it could, an eclipse cannot last for three hours. This was a darkening sun that was a sign of judgment and divine displeasure at what had taken place at Calvary. The wrath of God on sin was being borne by Jesus during those three crucial hours. That was why Jesus had spoken the words, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me.” Some commentators say that the darkening of the sun was sent as a veil to cover the nakedness and sufferings of Christ.

The second supernatural phenomenon was that of a great earthquake, with the tombs opening and dead people coming to life:

⁵¹At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split ⁵²and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. ⁵³They came out of the tombs after Jesus’ resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people (Matthew 27:51-53).

The third supernatural event was what took place in the temple. At the same time that Christ died, the temple curtain separating God from man was torn in two from the top of the curtain to the bottom, signifying that this was a sign from heaven. No wonder many of the priests came to faith (Acts 6:7). When the priests found out what had happened at Calvary at 3 p.m., the

² Key Word Study Bible, AMG Publishers. Key Word 5464, Page 1679.

traditional time for the congregational slaying of the lambs for Passover, many of them believed and placed their faith in Christ.

While thousands were in the temple courts for the ritual slaying of the Passover lambs, those ministering in the temple came out totally shocked when invisible hands tore the temple curtain, cloth as thick as a man's hand, right before their eyes. The curtain was torn by God to show you and me that the way into the very presence of God was open for all of us. Jesus has taken out of the way the barrier that separated God from man. Sin is what kept us from enjoying relationship with God, and Jesus paid the penalty for your sin and mine. "Calvary shows how far men will go in sin, and how far God will go for man's salvation" (H. C. Trumbull).³

The Gospel is the news of a Living Savior Who died in your place so that you and I can know God. He took the punishment we deserved and nailed it to the cross. We are told that, if we will repent (change our minds and direction in life) and believe (yield your life and trust to Christ and His saving work) the Gospel, then we will be saved (enjoy all the blessings of the covenant including eternal life). Will you trust Him?

Prayer: Father, just as the thief on the cross expressed his heart's desire to enter into life with the words "Remember me when You come into Your kingdom," I also ask You, please forgive me my sin. I turn around today and yield my life over to You. I choose to trust You with my eternal wellbeing. Because I put my trust in You, receive me into Your kingdom. Amen.

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³ Compiled by John Blanchard, *Gathered Gold, A Treasury of Quotations for Christians*, Printed by Evangelical Press, Welwyn, Hertfordshire, 1984. Page 58.