

SALVATION, NOT SAFETY

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Luke 23:32-49

If you want to learn about the practice of crucifixion in the ancient near east then don't bother to look to the gospel of Luke. Despite the fact that the crucifixion is a focal point in Jesus' biography, Luke tells us almost nothing about this activity. All we have is verse 33: *When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.* The assumption of course is that Luke's people would be familiar enough with crucifixion that it does not need explaining to them. Crucifixion was a horrific practice and not something that Luke needed to dwell upon.

As a form of capital punishment, crucifixion was designed to be a deterrent. Crucifixions were staged in public spaces easily witnessed by all. Often the bodies of the victims were left hanging long after the victim had died as a further warning to anyone with the idea of threatening the Roman Peace.

Crucifixion was brutal in that the victim might suffer for hours or even days while hanging. Crucifixion was demeaning because the public could observe the victim suffering, and crying, and dying. The public was free to further humiliate the victim as they hung. Crucifixion was as grotesque as could be imagined.

As Christians, we should be appalled that anyone should endure this type of death, especially the one we recognize as our Savior. It is what the apostle Paul will call the "foolishness of the cross" (1 Cor. 1:18). So why was Jesus crucified? Ostensibly, it was for treason against Rome. But we know that Jesus was crucified at the demand of leaders of the Jewish people. His preaching challenged their authority. His teaching questioned their power in the temple, their relationship with God.

After Jesus was arrested by the temple police, he was brought to the home of the chief priest. The next day the Jerusalem council convened to interrogate Jesus. They asked if he was the Messiah and he refused to answer. They asked if he was the Son of God and he responded, *You say that I am*, and they interpreted that to be an admission of guilt. They took him to Pilate but with a charge of insurrection. The Jews wanted Jesus killed and only the Romans could approve an execution. Pilate does not believe Jesus to be guilty but he gives in to the demands of the Jewish leaders and sentences Jesus to death. The charge brought against Jesus was for insurrection, in claiming to be king of the Jewish nation, a claim which would have usurped Roman authority, a treasonous claim.

The irony of course is that Jesus was guilty of these charges, just not in the way that they understood them. Jesus was son of God, he was the Messiah, he was king of the Jews.

As I read [red] the passage, did you notice how many times Jesus is ridiculed? He is mocked by the Jewish leaders, by the soldiers, and even mocked by one of the criminals being crucified beside him. Did you notice the common word between each statement? “Saving.” Each person who mocked Jesus challenges him to “save himself.” The Jewish leaders say, *He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!* The soldiers say, *If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!* Even the criminal says, *Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!*

Save yourself; save yourself; save yourself! In these words we can hear an echo of the devil from back in chapter 4 when Jesus was tested in the wilderness.

Jesus had just been baptized by John in the Jordan River when he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. There he fasted for forty days. And at the end of the forty days, the devil came to him and challenged the famished Jesus saying, *If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.* Jesus refused. Then the devil offered him all the kingdoms of the world saying, *worship me, it will all be yours.* Jesus refused. Then the devil took Jesus to the top of the temple and said, *If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here.* For the third time, Jesus refused and the devil left him *until an opportune time.*

At the crucifixion, we also find three challenges to Jesus to save himself. Each of these loosely matches the words of the devil. The first test from the devil was, *If you are the Son of God...* At the crucifixion, the Jewish leaders say, *let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God.* The second time, the devil offered him the kingdoms of the world. At the crucifixion, the soldiers ask Jesus if he was *king of the Jews*. The third time, the devil challenged Jesus to throw himself off the temple. On the cross, the criminal challenged Jesus to *save yourself and us*. In other words, get us down off these crosses. To all of these, Jesus refuses because they are just more tests.

What we find here is Jesus being the ultimate disciple. Luke is teaching his people not just about the life of Jesus, but how they are to be disciples of Jesus. Here we discover a great lesson in that Jesus does not seek his own safety but instead he seeks the salvation of others.

Back in chapter 6 Jesus laid out the ethical expectations he has for his followers. In other words, if you want to follow Jesus then these are his instructions. As I read them, think of how Jesus is following his own instructions on the cross.

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and

from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. [Remember, they cast lots for his clothes.] Do to others as you would have them do to you.

We see these words magnified in his death. What should be the greatest lesson is that no where in his life did Jesus do anything that was self-centered or designed to bring attention to himself. His actions were always for others. He preached, he taught, he cast out spirits, he healed, he fed; he shared the promise of God's kingdom to a empty world. Never did he say "look at me."

As I have mentioned in previous weeks, Jesus could easily have escaped his fate. When Judas led the crowd up the Mount of Olives, Jesus could have disappeared into the night. When questioned by Pilate, he could have denied everything. Doing so may have secured Jesus' safety, but it would cost the salvation of the world.

Even while being marched to the cross, he urges those around him not to cry for him but to cry for themselves. He challenges them to repent. And even on the cross he reaches out to others. He prays for those carrying out the crucifixion saying, *Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.*

And when one of the criminals taunts him saying, *Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!* The other criminal confronts the first saying, *Do you not fear God? ... We have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve, but this man has done nothing wrong.* And then he turns and asks, *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.* Jesus' response to him is to say, *Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.* Even here at the edge of death, Jesus offers comfort.

Then with his final words he cries out in a loud voice, *Father, into your hands I commend my spirit*, and then he dies. In his final act we discover the greatest lesson of discipleship—submission to God. A disciple should love others, even their enemies, and treat others as they would like to be treated in return. But ultimately this all becomes secondary to the expectation that we submit to God. A disciple should wake up every day and declare, *Father, into your hands I commend my spirit* (Ps 31:5), or as we say in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done." Jesus is not giving up to God, he is not giving in. Jesus is loudly proclaiming God's presence to the world—*into your hands I commend my spirit.*

As we have followed Jesus through Luke's gospel, never has he put his own safety above his love of others and his desire for their salvation. So many times he was tested, and so many times he refused the easy route. Jesus shows us, through his life and death, that to be a disciple means loving ones neighbor but putting our trust in the Lord. And I pray that we all may be such disciples! Amen.