

Luke 23:26-49 Jesus Saves Others by Not Saving Himself

We now come to one of the most profound and disturbing events in world history. We are not exaggerating when we call this event the tragedy of the ages. The creation puts to death its Creator. Sinful man kills the sinless Son of God.

It's beyond our capacity to fully understand everything that was going on when Jesus was crucified. All we can do is ponder anew what Jesus did for us when he laid down his life on our behalf.

Jesus has finally come to the end of his earthly life. He was arrested by the Jews, run through various trials, and finally condemned to death. Pilate had pronounced him not worthy of death several times, but ultimately he "delivered Jesus to their will" (vs. 25). The will of the Jews was crucifixion, and Pilate gave his permission.

Crucifixion is one of the most brutal means of execution that sinful men have ever devised. Most of us are fairly familiar with the practice. I'll spare you the gory details of exactly how Romans used crucifixion as a means of capital punishment. Luke summarizes what happened with the simple words "they crucified him."

The crucifixion of Jesus is both the greatest tragedy ever to occur as well as the greatest blessing that ever happened. It was a tragic injustice in that it was the murder of an innocent man. On the other hand, Jesus came into the world to die for our sins; he's the "lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." His sacrificial death was decreed in the mind of God even before creation (Rev 13:8). So this is the high point, the culmination of Jesus' earthly ministry. His death is the purchase price for the redemption of his people. Sinners are saved because of Jesus' death on the cross. So we both mourn and celebrate the death of Jesus.

Let's consider the details of the text. I've divided this message into two parts, so we'll get through only part of it today.

- I. The way to the cross .26-32
 - A. .26 Simon carries Jesus' cross.
 1. The soldiers led Jesus from the Praetorium, where Pilate held court, to the place of execution, outside the city walls. A great multitude of people were following along.

2. Typically, a condemned criminal would carry his own cross to the place of crucifixion. The fact that the soldiers compelled Simon to do this suggests that Jesus could not do it himself. John tells us (19:17) that Jesus carried his cross for a while, but eventually he could not carry it further.
3. Why couldn't Jesus carry the cross? He'd been beaten and flogged prior to the crucifixion. Flogging by a Roman soldier was so severe that it sometimes resulted in death. So Jesus was already in very bad physical condition when he began carrying the cross.
4. Simon is likely just a bystander that the soldiers press into service to do this one job. No Roman soldier would pick up the cross for a condemned criminal.
5. What happened to Simon after this? The Bible makes no mention of him after this. Some evidence (cf. Mk. 15:21 with Rom. 16:13) suggests that Simon became a follower of Jesus. He carried the cross as far as Calvary and perhaps stayed there to witness the event. Simon was so moved by these events that he becomes a follower of Jesus. Seems plausible although no one knows for sure.

B. .27-31 Jesus speaks to the mourners.

1. A "great company of people" followed Jesus as he made his way to Calvary. These people were weeping and mourning over Jesus' impending death.

.27end The word "bewailed" literally means "to beat one's chest." This was an expression of intense grief/sorrow. Many in the crowd felt a profound sense of pity for Jesus as he walked toward his death. They were mourning and grieving because of Jesus' death.

2. .28-30 Jesus warns these people that they will soon experience a great sorrow themselves.
 - a) "Daughters of Jerusalem" – not Jesus' women disciples, but the women who lived in Jerusalem. Jesus is warning them about the great crisis to come.

- b) .29 This coming catastrophe will be so horrible that people will consider it to be a blessing not to have children. And people would rather die than go through the great crisis which is about to happen (vs. 30). This coming disaster will be so terrible that they would want to be put out of their misery.

Quote: They will prefer a sudden, cataclysmic death by mountains falling upon them and by hills covering them to the daily, continued terrors and horrors of that siege.¹

- c) What he's predicting happened about 40 years after this, when the Romans destroyed the city of Jerusalem in AD 70. Women and children were among those who were slaughtered by the Roman soldiers.
- d) .31 How do we understand Jesus' comments about a green and dry tree?

(1) Jesus is making a contrast between green, living wood and dry, dead wood. In fact, the word "tree" (ξύλον) is literally the word for "wood."

(2) The sense of this proverbial statement seems to be this: "If this can happen to me, an innocent person, under the judgment of sinful man, imagine what will happen to you when the judgment of God falls?"

I.e., if this happens to the innocent, imagine what will happen to the guilty.

(3) The statement is a warning of future judgment. If the green wood can go up in flames, imagine what will happen to the dry wood. Jerusalem is ripe for destruction under God's judgment. They had rejected their Messiah, and now God is going to reject them.

(4) Even as he is facing a painful death, he's still warning people of God's judgment.

¹ Lenski, 1129.

App: Jesus frequently exhorted people to avoid the coming judgment of God. He was constantly warning people about what would happen if they failed to repent.

Cf. Luke 13:1-5 Pilate's attack on worshippers in the temple, the tower of Siloam—"except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish."

People today don't like to hear about God's judgment or the need for repentance. People today want to hear about God's love and his desire to give us our best life now. People want to think about God like an indulgent grandfather or a rich uncle. They don't want to consider the fact that "God is angry with the wicked every day" (Ps 7:11).

Jesus constantly warns us to escape the wrath to come by repenting of our sins and trusting in him. If you fail to do that, you will face the severe judgment of God. If you think that Jesus' suffering under the unjust judgment of man was bad, just wait until you experience suffering under the righteous judgment of God! If the green wood is capable of burning, just imagine what happens to the dry wood!

Judgment is coming, and the only way to avoid it is to repent and believe in Jesus.

II. The crucifixion .33-38

A. .33 The place was called Calvary, which means "the place of a skull." It's the Greek word "kranion" – root of our word "cranium." The Aramaic word is *Golgotha*.

1. The place apparently looked like a skull, or it could be that many skulls were in that place.
2. It was outside the city walls, but it was in a public place. The Romans wanted everyone to see what happens to criminals and revolutionaries, so they conducted their executions where everyone could see, usually along a main road.

B. .33b Luke tells us simply, "there they crucified him."

1. The other Gospel writers tell us much more Jesus' crucifixion. This method of execution was one of the most brutal ever dreamed up in the corrupt heart of man. I won't go into the details, but I think we all realize how painful death by crucifixion could be.

2. The crucifixion would obviously be intensely physically painful. But at this time Jesus was also bearing our sins. God was pouring out his wrath for sin on his beloved son.

Paul describes it this way: 2 Corinthians 5:21 *For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*

C. .33b Two criminals were crucified with him.

1. For Jesus to be executed between two convicted criminals was a further humiliation. Pilate probably intended this as an insult to the Jews. Here is their king, crucified between two criminals.
2. We should remember that an OT prophecy mentions that the Messiah would be with sinners in his death.

Isa 53:12 ... *He was numbered with the transgressors*

So this is another fulfillment of prophecy.

D. .34 Jesus forgave his tormentors.

1. Jesus frequently taught that his disciples should forgive their enemies, and he applied that teaching to himself.
2. It's really a remarkable thing that Jesus had compassion on those who were abusing him. Instead of being angry at these people for causing his suffering, he asks God to forgive them.

Quote: He might have prayed for justice and for just retribution; but his love rises above his suffering, he prays for pardon for his enemies.²

3. Jesus describes the people responsible for his death as no knowing what they were doing.
 - a) The soldiers certainly did not grasp the significance of what they were doing. The men there were executioners; that was their job. I doubt that they enjoyed it. And I doubt that they knew much of anything about the people they crucified. They were just doing what they were told to do. I think Jesus recognized that fact.

² Lenski, 1133.

- b) Even the Jewish leaders, although they knew much more about Jesus and were liable for his death, did not truly understand what they were doing. To them, Jesus was a fraud and a false prophet. They thought they were serving God by putting him to death. They did not truly understand what they were doing.

Quote: Is it not marvelous beyond words that Jesus, in his earnest intercession for his torturers, presents to the Father a special plea, an argument, as it were, for the granting of his petition, namely, “for they do not know what they are doing”?³

This detail is another fulfillment of prophecy.

Isaiah 53:12 ... *He bore the sin of many, And made intercession for the transgressors.*

App: If we face persecution, we must follow this same pattern. We don't do unto others what they did to us. We forgive those who mistreat us and pray for them. Jesus forgave his enemies, and we must follow his example.

- E. .34b The soldiers cast lots for his clothing.
1. Executioners often took for themselves the minor personal belongings of those executed. This was one of the few benefits of being an executioner.
 2. Jesus would have had several items of clothing—a turban or hat of some kind, sandals, a belt, cloak/outer garment, and seamless inner garment/tunic.
 3. None of this would have been very valuable. But the soldiers amused themselves by gambling for these items of clothing.
 4. The fact that the soldiers have Jesus' clothing implies that Jesus hung on the cross with no clothing at all, adding to Jesus' humiliation. Paintings and sculptures of crucifixion are often inaccurate in that they show Jesus covered up at least partially. It's almost certain that he had on no clothing at all.
 5. The soldiers fulfill prophecy by gambling for Jesus' garments.

³ William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke*, vol. 11, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 1028.

Psalm 22:18 *They divide My garments among them, And for My clothing they cast lots.*

- F. .35-37 Some observed while others mocked.
1. It seems likely that there are several hundred if not more onlookers. The city is filled with visitors for the feast, and many of these are followers of Jesus. So I'm sure the crowd of onlookers was quite large.
 2. .35b Three times in Luke we find people suggesting that Jesus save himself. Jesus is saving others by not saving himself.
That's an important part of the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. Jesus died for sinners; he took God's wrath for sin upon himself. He gave up his life so that we might gain life. He saves believers through his own death. That's what we call the "great exchange"—he saves us by not saving himself.
- G. .38 A placard/sign identifying Jesus was placed on the cross.
1. Pilate had ordered that a notice or sign be attached to the cross above Jesus' head signifying who Jesus was. A sign like this would state the accusations against the victim explaining why he's being crucified.
 2. If we consult all the Gospel accounts, we find that the complete statement on the sign said "This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."
 3. You've perhaps seen the letters **INRI** on a crucifix. The letters stand for the Latin "Iesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum,"
 4. And this is a further insult by Pilate against the Jews. He crucifies their king along with two common criminals.

I imagine that it would have been very tempting for Jesus to come down from the cross at this point. Many were scornfully urging Jesus to save himself and prove that he was the Messiah by coming down from the cross. Jesus easily could have saved himself, but instead he maintained his commitment to accomplishing God's will. He stayed on the cross when he easily could have come down and saved himself.

It was not weakness that kept Jesus on the cross, it was great power. It was the power of love for his people and of loyalty to God that kept Jesus on the cross. We know that Jesus could have called legions of angels to release him from the cross (Mt 26:53). Instead, Jesus stayed on the cross and fulfilled God's plan to grant salvation to unworthy sinners.

What is the appropriate response to Jesus' death? We must see it as the adequate payment for our sins. When we repent of our sins and trust in Jesus, God forgives our sins and grants us eternal life. The basis for God's forgiveness is the sacrificial death of Christ. We respond to Jesus' death by accepting the gift of eternal life that Jesus purchased for us on the cross. I hope and pray that you have accepted that gift.