



7 Last Steps to the CROSS

Jesus' Path to the Crucifixion in the Gospel of LUKE

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Audio Text - Climax: The CRUCIFIXION

The CRUCIFIXION - Luke 23:26-49

We have now reached the Climax of following Jesus in His 7 last steps to the cross. We have now come to the Crucifixion. He now stands at the cross to be crucified. Before reaching this point, He had already been forsaken 7 times. He was betrayed by Judas Iscariot, one of His chosen Twelve. He was denied by Peter, the leader of the Twelve. He was mocked by the Roman soldiers who held Him under arrest. He was prosecuted by the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council, who sought His death. They sent Him to Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, for trial, to seek the death sentence against Him. Pilate sent Him to Herod, a Jew who was the Roman governor of Galilee, to get his judgement. He was sent back to Pilate, for the final verdict. Pilate repeatedly pronounced Jesus innocent. Yet he acquiesced to the crowd and the Sanhedrin to send Him to be crucified. So, now, Jesus was sentenced to carry the cross to His own crucifixion.

Luke 23:26-31 (ESV) tells us -

²⁶And 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. ²⁷And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. ²⁸But turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' ³⁰Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' ³¹For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

The Burden of Carrying the Cross

It was the law of that time that if a prisoner was too weak to carry the cross, the soldiers may require someone to carry it for him. This was the case for Jesus. After the punishment He had already received, He was too physically weak to carry the cross. This would be the horizontal beam to which His hands will be nailed at the place of crucifixion. The vertical pole, to which His legs will be nailed, would be set up by the soldiers there. Crucifixion was deliberately designed to be the most cruel way of dying for those who face the death penalty. It was intended for those who commit the most serious crimes, such as murder or sedition. It was meant to prolong the pain for as long as possible before one dies. The nailing and tying of the arms to the horizontal beam, and the legs to the vertical pole, stretches out the person so that he cannot breathe unless he uses his nailed legs to push himself up, and his nailed arms to pull himself up. One can therefore stay for a very long time bearing this pain of pushing and pulling oneself up to breathe until one has no more strength to do so. One then dies of suffocation. This is why, when they want the crucified person to die faster, they break his legs so that he cannot push himself up to breathe anymore. Is this the way for an innocent man to die? Is this the way for the Messiah to be treated by those He came to save? But it was exactly how Jesus was treated.

Simon of Cyrene was drafted by the soldiers to carry the horizontal beam for Jesus. Mark 15:21 tells us that he was the father of Alexander and Rufus. This means that he was known to the disciples and some readers of the Gospel of Mark. He was, therefore, quite likely, a believer himself. He had no choice in this matter. But symbolically, he gives us a picture of what it means to follow Jesus as he carried the cross behind Him. The requirement of true discipleship includes being willing to suffer with Him and bear His burden with Him in His service. While Simon was

compelled to do so, true disciples of Christ should be willing partakers of the call and conditions of true discipleship.

Mourning for the Dead

The multitude of those lamenting and mourning for Jesus were not necessarily His disciples or His supporters. For it was customary at that time to lament and mourn for anyone facing death. It had no bearing on whether these people thought Him guilty or not. In this light, it is most notable that Jesus directed them to mourn and lament for themselves! He was declaring to them, even as He walked to the cross, that they faced God's judgement for their sins. When it comes, it would be most excruciating for them.

The fact that Jesus warned the crowd of God's judgement against them reveals to us that Jesus was not a defeated man. He was very aware of the sins that were committed against Him and of the Father's judgement that would follow. But His warning was not out of personal bitterness or vindictiveness. It was His supreme awareness of the evil of sin and of the inevitable execution of divine justice against it. What He declared to the crowd was the truth of the inevitability of judgement for sin, unless one repent and surrender to Him as Lord and God. For Jesus is the Lord and God of all. He was never defeated. Long before He took His 7 last steps to the cross, Jesus told His disciples in Luke 18:31-34 (ESV) that all these will happen. He knew fully what He was to face.

³¹And taking the twelve, he said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. ³²For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon.

³³And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise." ³⁴But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.

He voluntarily gave Himself up to face the litany of human sins against Him all the way to the cross itself. There He accepted an illegal, unjust, and criminal, death as an innocent man and as the Messiah of God. In the first message of this series, on the 1st Step that Jesus took to the cross, in Luke 22:52-53, I highlighted that He calmly accepted arrest to the bewilderment of His disciples. He knew that He will be betrayed, denied, beaten, sentenced to death through farcical trials, and die on the cross. At no point did He try to prevent, or escape, or fight, the process. At no point did He show anger at the betrayal, denial, mocking, or travesty of justice, that He faced at every step of His way to the cross. Luke's account in Luke 23:1-4 simply tells us that Pilate found no credibility in the Sanhedrin's charge against Jesus. Mark 15:4-5 adds the detail that Pilate was amazed that He did not answer his many questions. For it was typical that the accused would argue vehemently for his innocence so as to escape the penalty. Jesus never argued any case for Himself.

The Lamb of God our High Priest

This is our emphasis: Jesus voluntarily walked to the cross to die for our sake as the Lamb of God, God's own sacrifice for our sins. He Himself is our High Priest from heaven who offered Himself as our sacrifice. The Book of Hebrews teaches us this great truth:

Hebrews 4:14-16 (ESV)

¹⁴Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 10:4-14 (ESV) teaches us:

⁴For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. ⁵Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; ⁶in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. ⁷Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.' " ⁸When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), ⁹then he added, "Behold, I have come to do your will." He does away with the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. ¹¹And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹²But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. ¹⁴For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

Christ was made man in order to be God's sacrifice for our sins. The OT animal sacrifices were only symbolic. They were meant to point to the sacrifice of Christ. His sacrifice is the only sacrifice that can pay for our sins. He is the only sinless man who did not have any sin to die for. Therefore He was the only one who can die for our sins. Yet as the only sinless man He was the only who did not need to die at all! Therefore His death, His walk to the cross, was an entirely voluntary act to save us. He is the supreme expression of the Love of God for us.

Let me reiterate: Christ alone did not deserve death. We are the ones who deserve death for our sin. Yet, in order to save us from having to die for our sins, Jesus Christ, offered Himself to take our place so that we do not have to face death! No, we do not deserve to be saved. We deserve to die. No, Christ is the only one who do not deserve death. Yet He is the only one who can die for our sins. Did He have to do this? No! Absolutely Not. But He did! Why? So that we may be saved.

Jesus Hung on the Cross

Now, Jesus reached the place of His crucifixion, called, The Skull, and was hung there on the cross. Luke 23:32-43 (ESV) reports that

³²Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³And 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. ³⁴And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. ³⁵And 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!" ³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine ³⁷and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." ³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴²And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Luke's account that Jesus was hung on the cross with a criminal on His left and His right is not meant to exalt Him, as some may think, because He was at the centre. That would not make sense. How can Jesus be an exalted criminal? The message is the reverse. He who is innocent, the Messiah, God come as man, was treated as the worst of criminals and put together with them as one of them.

Luke's is the only Gospel that records the different responses of the two criminals next to Jesus. One mocked Him like the rest that He should save Himself and them. The other not only recognised His innocence, but believed that He was in fact the Messiah who will bring in God's Kingdom. Therefore he asked that Jesus remember him when He enters His Kingdom.

There was double irony in what the mocker said. If Jesus was the Messiah, why should He be on the cross? Why could He not save Himself? He echoed all those who mocked Him this way. But we have noted that Jesus was not there to save Himself. If He did not want to be crucified no power in heaven or on earth could bring Him to the cross. He was at the cross and did not intend to escape because He wanted to die for our sins. Furthermore, why should He save this criminal who was justly condemned for his crime? Even as he justly faced death for his crime, he knew only to mock a supposed fellow criminal. The evil of our fallen nature blinds us entirely to the truth. All who hate Him could only mock. Even those who believe in Him at that time were puzzled and confused and stayed away or ran away.

The criminal who recognised Jesus for who He is was neither confused or puzzled. He ask that He may save him! This was certainly not because he understood everything. It only meant that he recognised that Jesus was not only innocent but the bearer of God's Kingdom. So he asked to be remembered by Jesus and was saved. This is true of all who respond in faith to the Gospel of Christ. None of us understand all of God's truth in entirety. But we recognise Him for who He is and are ready to repent and surrender to Him and ask to be saved. This is saving faith. We are not saved by superior knowledge. We are not saved by superior intelligence. We are not even saved by superior revelation because the same Gospel is presented to all for our response. He saves us when we recognise Him for who He is and respond in faith to repent of sin and surrender to Him as our Lord and our God.

Luke had remarkable insight to share with us these two very different responses of the two criminals crucified with Jesus. He is depicting to us how we, who are all sinners, may respond to Him. If we are like the one who mocked Him, we share in common with all who sent Him to the cross, our apathy or rejection of who He is. Our condemnation is just. If we are like the one who recognised Him for who He is and ask to be saved, He will save us.

Again, the Gospel of Luke is the only Gospel that records Jesus' words of forgiveness while He was hanging on the cross. I had foreshadowed this in our 3rd message on Step 3 when the soldiers mocked Him. I had highlighted that these words of forgiveness was meant for the soldiers who put Him on the cross. They were following their orders, like a good soldier should, so to speak. They just added their own cruelty and mockery, just because they can. It displayed their egotistical mastery of the criminals under their control. It also displayed their own sinfulness. It could have extended to the two criminals who were on the crosses next to His. Perhaps Jesus knew that their crimes, though serious, were done out of ignorance, or inability, to differentiate between right and wrong. I noted, however, that this did not extend to the Jewish Council, Pilate or Herod, for they knew exactly what they were doing. The Jewish Council, in particular, wanted Jesus dead, because they rejected His claim to be their Messiah. He became a threat to their position of power. So they very deliberately wanted Him dead. Their wish was granted by Pilate, even though he knew Jesus was innocent. Note that Jesus did not refrain from declaring to the crowd that were lamenting and mourning for Him, according to custom for a dying person, that they should do this for themselves because they are under God's judgement. So Jesus is not a soppy sentimentalist who wants to pardon everyone whatever their sin. He saves all who repent of sin, recognise Him for who He is, as Lord and God, and seek His salvation. He also sought to save those who acted in true ignorance. This was the point of His prayer of forgiveness while He hung on the cross. It also revealed that He had no bitterness, no recrimination, no vindictiveness or vengefulness, even as He was waiting in pain for death on the cross.

Jesus knew that He would be “in paradise” after dying. This was the assurance He gave to the criminal who asked to be remembered. Because of its etymology, the root word from which it is derived, it is typically assumed to be a place where those who die in faith goes to. But this word occurs only three times in the Bible, all in the NT. Besides Luke's reference, are 2 Corinthians 12:3, where Paul speaks of one being caught up in paradise, and Revelation 2:7 where it speaks of where the tree of life is. I believe that what matters is not the geographical location, but the spiritual state of blessedness. This more figurative, but very significant meaning, not of a place, but of being spiritually alive and blessed, is definitely intended by all three references. It does not eliminate the possibility that it may be a spiritual space or place where believers will be. But it is definitely not a physical location here on earth. Without having to go into any debate about location, it is most certainly about being blessed by God. Jesus was, without doubt, assuring this man, that his faith has ensured that he will be blessed by God in his death.

Jesus Died on the Cross

We now move from Jesus hanging on the cross to His dying on the cross. Luke 23:44-49 (ESV) gives us Jesus' last moment on the cross -

⁴⁴It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, ⁴⁵while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last. ⁴⁷Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, “Certainly this man was innocent!” ⁴⁸And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. ⁴⁹And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things.

The hours that Jesus hung on the cross was from the 6th hour to the 9th hour according to the Jewish day. This is 12 noon to 3 pm in our count. This was the brightest and hottest part of the day. Yet darkness descended at these hours when Jesus was on the cross. It was not a solar eclipse. Astronomy tells us that a solar eclipse can only be during a new moon. But the Passover, when Jesus was crucified, is always at a full moon. It was a supernatural act of the Father to show the sin of humanity and the cruelty shown to Jesus. It is a sign of our sin and of God's anger against evil. It is notable that in the traditional observance of Good Friday in historical churches, the hours of service is from 12 noon to 3 pm. This is a way of worshipping and meditating on what Christ did for us on the cross. Unfortunately, many churches do not know this, or move away from this practice, because it is considered too long a service. Sadly, it is not a very good reflection of our discipleship. Convenience seems to be more important. Long services are too tedious. But other things, like shopping, watching TV, or movies, or eating, and partying, can take so long or longer! Good Friday is only once a year. How many times a year do we shop, watch movie, eat, or party, for 3 hours or more? This is not about one service. It is about the state of our discipleship everyday of our lives. For all that Christ and God have done for us, why is worshipping Him so tedious?

At the time of Jesus' death, when He cried out to the Father to receive His spirit, the temple curtain was torn in two. This was a thick heavy curtain that separated the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place within the temple, or before the temple, the tabernacle. In the Holy Place was the Altar of Incense, the Table of Show Bread, and the Golden Lampstand. The Altar of Incense, which was to be burning with incense everyday, points to the prayers of the faithful. The Table of Show Bread points to Jesus as the Bread of Life. The Golden Lampstand points to Jesus as the Light of the World. In the Most Holy Place was the Ark of the Covenant. It represented the very presence of God. That was where He appeared if He made His presence felt. The tearing up of

this curtain was a sign that with the death of Christ, the Father had opened the way for His faithful People to approach Him directly in and through Christ. In Christ, the barrier of our sin that prevents us from being able to draw near to the Father is removed. But only in Christ! We cannot do so apart from Him, on our own, or by any other way. Christ is the only way of salvation for all humankind.

In the Gospel of Luke, the response of the centurion, on seeing these things, was to declare that Jesus was innocent. The significance of this is amplified if we note that he was recognising that God pronounced Jesus innocent. It contradicted the pronouncements of the human courts, whether Jew or Gentile. The human courts were wrong and unjust. Jesus was not guilty. Jesus did no wrong. He did not deserve death. He was fully exonerated by God. Luke, thereby, emphasised the righteousness of Jesus. The guilt and error of all who sent Him to the cross was exposed.

What the crowd meant by beating their chests, as noted by Luke, is less clear. What is certain is that all were shakened by the miraculous darkness and tearing up of the curtain in the temple. But whether it meant that they repented and surrendered to Christ is not clear. I believe Luke's point is to simply show us that God was with Jesus in all that He did. Jesus had the Father's approval and affirmation for who He is, all that He did, and for sacrificing Himself on the cross so that humankind can be saved.

Luke notes that Jesus' acquaintances and the women who followed Him from Galilee were witnesses of His crucifixion. This is a straightforward statement. It identifies for us who among those who followed Jesus actually witness all that happened through His 7 last steps to the cross and on the cross itself. The twelve, as we know, were in hiding. So were most of His other disciples. So how did Luke get his information? How did the Gospel writers get their information? This is Luke's straightforward answer to these questions. It was not just those who despised Jesus who saw what happened. Some disciples and followers did too. They are the vital human witnesses we have of what actually happened to Jesus on the way to the cross, and when He was on the cross, until He died.

Close

So we have come to the completion of our series on the 7 last steps that Jesus took to the cross in the Gospel of Luke. The climax of His time on the cross is the most instructive and significant of all that He did for us, except for what happened next, His resurrection! That would be for another time. In the meantime, let us prayerfully ask the Holy Spirit to enable us to receive and digest all that Jesus did for us, so that we may truly worship Him and put Him first above all, and respond to His love with ours by faith and obedience to Him.

May the Blessing of God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - be with us all forever more! AMEN!