

LUKE

Part 82: "The Crucifixion"

Luke 23:26-56

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Welcome

Hello, my name is David Ritchie, and I am privileged to serve as the Lead Pastor of Redeemer Christian Church. I want to welcome you and thank you for being a part of our Good Friday service on this very irregular Holy Week.

If you have never been a part of a Good Friday service before, I want you to know that there is a different tone to this particular service.

It is not really a celebratory time of worship. It is more of a serious and sober moment of worship, wherein we acknowledge the sacrifice that made redemption possible.

On Good Friday, we confront head-on the horror of Christ and him crucified.

The cross of Jesus Christ represents an uncomfortable and unpalatable truth. It represents the truth that our sin and our selfishness have created and merited death. Yet, Jesus has taken that death upon himself, so that we might know what it means to be forgiven; so that we might be given a hope and a life we do not deserve.

But it is only when we embrace the horror of Good Friday that we will know the true glory and victory of Easter Sunday. *It is only when we know the weight of our sin that we will know the worth of our savior.*

For the last several years, our church has been on an intentionally slow journey through the gospel of Luke. Luke is by far the longest of the four gospels. And we have not rushed through the story that Luke tells us about Jesus. We have savored the teachings of Jesus and the extraordinary account of his miracles. We have observed the story of his birth, his ministry, and his long journey to Jerusalem.

And all of what Luke has conveyed to us about Jesus has been leading us to this moment, as Jesus Christ dies a horrific death on a Roman cross.

I will now read Luke's account of the crucifixion. And as I read these words, allow your heart to truly receive and meditate upon the word of the cross.

Today's Scripture reading is from Luke, chapter 23, verses 26 through 56.

Scripture Reading

And 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. And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. But turning to them Jesus said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For 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!' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?' Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And 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. And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' And they cast lots to divide his garments. And 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!' The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, 'Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.' And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he said to him, 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.' It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!' And having said this he breathed his last. Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, 'Certainly this man was innocent!' And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things. Now there was a man named Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea. He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man, who had not consented to their decision and action; and he was looking for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid. It was the day of Preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment (Luke 23:26–56, ESV).

Prayer

Almighty and Everlasting God, we thank you for the gift of the cross. We are thankful for the sacrifice of your Son that leads to our redemption. May your Spirit give us open

eyes and tender hearts as we look to the message of your cross on this Good Friday. We pray this in the mighty name of Jesus, our Savior, and Redeemer. AMEN.

Introduction

In northeastern France, near the border with Germany, lies the small village of Isenheim. In the 1500s, a monastery in Isenheim named St. Anthony's served as a hospital for victims of the plague.

One of the most common diseases found at St. Anthony's at this time was a gruesome condition known as ergotism, which came from people eating grains that had been infected by a regional fungus.

Victims of ergotism – popularly known as St. Anthony's fire – first reported headaches and nausea. But eventually, the disease grew into spasms, skin disease, and gangrene, culminating in death.

The role of the monastery was to treat the suffering patients with dignity and love, to give them a good death, and to offer them the hope of everlasting life in Christ.

Inside the sanctuary, where the monks prayed and worshipped, there was a decorative altarpiece behind the table where communion was observed. This work of art known as "*The Isenheim Altarpiece*" (1516), was painted by Matthias Grünewald [show image 1 "*The Isenheim Altarpiece*"; as I talk, try to focus on the crucifixion portion of this piece]. And in the realm of art history, Grünewald's masterpiece is probably the most famous, the most memorable, and the most haunting painting of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Here the body of Jesus hangs on the cross. His limbs are stretched upon the beams of wood. His hands and feet are pierced. He is at the very moment of expiring death, as he bears the wrath of God and the sins of the world.

But one of the more fascinating and moving choices that Grünewald makes as an artist is to depict Christ with the very disease that was being treated in the monastery. Christ himself burns with St. Anthony's fire. As Jesus dies on the cross, boils and sores blanket his skin. His outer limbs, and especially his feet, are gangrenous and shriveled.

Grünewald shows us that Christ is not only bearing the suffering of all people in general. He is bearing the very personal, the very localized sickness of the people in Isenheim.

It is a visual reminder that, on the cross, Jesus does not just suffer. He suffers *with us*. He suffers *for us*. And his suffering accomplishes our redemption.

Jesus is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53:

"Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he

was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:4–5, ESV).

Exposition

1.) Jesus is condemned to death.

As we come to our Scripture reading for today in Luke 23, Jesus has been charged and condemned for crimes of treason and sedition he did not commit.

In reality, Jesus is innocent. Yet, in a legal sense, he has been *declared* guilty. Although he is perfectly righteous, he has been condemned. This declaration of a legal status is imputation.

Christ is imputed with sin so that we might be imputed with his righteousness. As the Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, *“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21, ESV).*

After being condemned, Jesus is led to a mount outside of Jerusalem named Golgotha, which literally means “the place of the skull.”

2.) Simon of Cyrene carries the cross of Jesus.

As Jesus begins his journey to the mount of crucifixion, he collapses under the weight of the cross he carries. He, in the last twenty-four hours, has been sleep-deprived, abandoned, tried, and physically tortured. So, we can’t imagine the level of weakness and exhaustion he experiences in this moment.

As Jesus falls, the Roman guards seize a man named Simon of Cyrene. Cyrene is the name of a town in northern Africa, in what is today the nation of Libya. Most likely, Simon is a member of the Jewish community living in Cyrene. He has traveled long and far to Jerusalem, so that he may participate in the Passover sacrifice. But he does not know that Providence has placed him in this exact moment so that he may participate in the true and better Passover sacrifice.

Jesus, the lamb of God, is led to the slaughter, so that the judgment of God may Passover his people of all nations [Show image 2 *“Jesus and the Cyrenian” (1848)*].

Many have seen in Simon of Cyrene a model of Christian discipleship. Simon picks up the cross of Christ, humbly and faithfully following Christ down the road to Calvary.

Simon carries the cross of Jesus. But Jesus carries the sin of the world.

3.) The daughters of Jerusalem mourn for Jesus.

As Jesus trudges forward, several women of Jerusalem follow along, mourning and lamenting the horror that they see before them [show image 3 “Christ Falling on the Way to Calvary” (1516-17) by Raphael”].

But Jesus tells these “Daughters of Jerusalem” not to mourn for him, but to mourn for Jerusalem itself. He, yet again, prophesies that judgment and destruction that is coming upon the Holy City.

In the year A.D. 70, this happens. Rome destroys the city of Jerusalem.

The Jewish temple, the Levitical sacrifices, and the priesthood will all come to an end.

But Jesus himself is building a true temple within his people. He, in this very moment, is offering the ultimate atoning sacrifice to end all sacrifices. He is becoming the true and forever priest who mediates between the sin of man and the holiness of God.

4.) *Jesus is beaten, crucified, and mocked.*

Finally, Jesus reaches Golgatha, the “place of the skull.” He is laid on the wooden beams of the cross. The Roman soldiers nail his hands and feet to the wood, sending pulsating pain throughout his nervous system that would have put his body into a near state shock. He is then lifted up – naked and exposed – for all eyes to see, and above him, there is a sign that mockingly states: “*This is the King of the Jews.*”

One of the casualties of our age is we often do not understand the absolute scandal of the cross. In our culture, the symbol of the cross is most commonly seen in personal jewelry or home décor. And there is nothing wrong with this, but it does show us how far we are away from what the cross once represented in the first century – which was absolute horror and torture.

In death by crucifixion, the condemned was stripped entirely naked, tied or nailed to a wooden cross, and left to die in agony [Show image 4 “Crucifixion” (1946) by Graham Sutherland].

The crucifixion was not only designed for maximum pain but maximum humiliation as well. In the Roman Empire, crosses were placed in high trafficked areas like the highways, or in the case of Jerusalem, outside of the city gate. Dead and dying bodies were lifted up like billboard advertising the power of the Empire. In fact, a person’s crimes were often nailed above a criminal’s completely exposed body. Crucifixion was thus meant to be a public statement: “If you rebel, if you misbehave, this could happen to you.”

For victims of the cross, the true cause of death on the cross was not blood loss, but rather, asphyxiation. Death on the cross was a slow and tortuous form of hanging, in which a victim would have to hoist their bodies upward in order to take a breath until they were so weak that they could no longer do so.

Death by crucifixion was so horrific and brutal and painful it gave us the new word “*excruciating*.”

5.) *Jesus forgives his enemies.*

We might expect victims of such torture to have one of two responses. They might cry out for mercy for themselves. Or they might cry out for judgment upon their enemies.

Yet, Jesus does neither. Jesus cries out to God for the forgiveness of those who are in the very act of murdering him: “*And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do’*” (Luke 23:34a, ESV).

Deep in our bones, we know that there is such a thing as justice and injustice. When we sin against someone else or when we are sinned against, there is a sense of moral indebtedness that is created. There is wrong that cries out to be put to right.

But the Bible reveals to us that our sins are not just against one another. Our sin is ultimately against God. When we sin, we defy the rightful king of the universe. Our moral debt is due to God, and that debt must be paid.

But at the cross, God in Christ chooses to pay that debt himself. He forgives his enemies. And he extends the gift of that forgiveness to us.

No matter our background, no matter our past, no matter how much we have sinned against God, we too can be liberated by the gift of amazing grace.

6.) *The dying thief is granted salvation.*

Jesus dies between two criminals, who are also hung on crosses. One of these men mocks Jesus, saying, “If you are the savior, save yourself, and save us while you are at it.”

But the other man [show image [5“Christ and the Good Thief” \(1566\) by Titian](#)], acknowledges that while he and the other convict deserve to be dying on the cross, Jesus is innocent. In this moment, it is clear that this “good thief” is not only able to see Jesus’s innocence; he is also able to believe in Jesus and trust in his power. I doubt that the dying thief knows all there is to know about Jesus. I doubt his theology is perfect. And we know his life is not in order. But this simple faith is a saving faith nonetheless.

The good thief worshipfully makes a request: “*And he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ And he said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise’*” (Luke 23:42–43, ESV).

On the cross, although he is suffering greatly, Jesus is not dying in defeat or doubt. He is not dying with his fingers crossed. He dies, knowing *exactly* what his suffering is accomplishing. Because of his death, eternal life will be granted to those who do not deserve it.

As we often sing together, *“The dying thief rejoiced to see / That fountain in his day; / And there may I, though vile as he, / Wash all my sins away.”*

7.) *The curtain of the temple is torn in two*

As Jesus dies on the cross, Luke does something a little strange. If Luke were directing a film, the camera has been fixed only on Jesus as he is tried, led to the mount, and crucified. But for one brief moment, Luke has his camera cut to the inside of the temple.

Look at verses 44 and 45: *“It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun’s light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two”* (Luke 23:44–45, ESV).

Why is this detail added? The curtain inside of the temple refers to a drape that separated the innermost room known as the Most Holy Place. This room was designed to a sacred room where the ark of the covenant was to reside. It represented the one place on earth where God’s presence was to dwell.

But because God was so holy, no one was allowed to enter this room, except for the High Priest on the Day of Atonement.

The curtain, thus, represented the barrier between the sin of man and the holiness of God. But by the cross, that barrier between God and man is ruptured.

If your faith is in Jesus, the cross has forever dealt with that which separated you from the love of the Father.

8.) *Jesus yields his spirit to the Father.*

Now, the work of the suffering servant is accomplished. Having lived a perfectly righteous life, Jesus dies the death of a criminal. And in his final moment, he submits himself to the will of his heavenly Father: *“Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!’ And having said this he breathed his last. Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, ‘Certainly this man was innocent!’”* (Luke 23:46-47, ESV).

9.) *Jesus is laid in the tomb.*

Then, we encounter a man named Joseph of Arimathea. He happens to be a member of the group that brought the very charges against Jesus that led to his death. However, Joseph did not consent to this decision, and he is described by Luke as a “good and righteous” man who was “looking for the kingdom of God.”

Joseph goes to Pilate. He asks Pilate for the body of Jesus, and the Roman Governor grants his request [show image [6“Descent from the Cross” \(1308-1311\) by Duccio](#)]. He then takes the body of Jesus down from the cross, and transports it to a nearby grave

that has never been used. And at last, Jesus is laid to rest within it [show image [7Wall Mosaic at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem](#)].

The sun will soon set, and the Jewish day of Sabbath will soon begin.

As God rested on the seventh day after completing the work of creation, Christ will now rest in the grave on the seventh day, after completing the work of our redemption.

Now, because his work is finished, we can enter into a true sabbath of rest and restoration for the soul. And thus the first Good Friday comes to an end.

Conclusion

Our world is in a moment of great pain and brokenness. When we look at insurmountable needs caused by COVID-19, we might be tempted to throw up our hands in a sense of helpless despair and say, “Who is sufficient for these things?”

It is here that think the message of the cross rings all the truer. For who has known our frailty, our vulnerability, and our need more than the one who humbled himself to the point of death? Who has known the pain of isolation greater than the one who hung alone on the cross? Who has known the ailing agony of failing lungs than the one who died of asphyxiation by crucifixion?

With weakness and much trembling, our only hope is to know Christ and him crucified, knowing that suffering and death are real, but that redemption and resurrection are coming.

And that brings us back to where we began – the “*Isenheim Altarpiece*” (1516) [show image [1 “The Isenheim Altarpiece,”](#) focusing on John the Baptist image [8John the Baptist](#)].

To the right of Jesus stands the figure of John the Baptist, wearing a garment of camel’s hair. Now, having already been murdered himself, John the Baptist was not a witness to the crucifixion of Christ. But his whole life existed to bear witness to the person of Christ.

John stands as the final prophet of the Old Testament era. His Bible is open, and his finger is pointing toward the crucified savior. Without words, he is eternally proclaiming to the viewer, “*Behold, the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!*”

The words behind him pronounce in Latin, “He must increase. I must decrease.”

In the age of our own plague and pain, we cannot save ourselves, and we cannot save the world. But we can point to the only one who can save. This is all we can do; and this all we need to do. This is the message of Good Friday. AMEN.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, with fear and trembling, we come before your throne of grace in our time of need. We stand in awe of both the brutality and beauty of your cross.

In this season of suffering, in this season of pain, may we know that you are a God who has chosen to know our suffering, so that one day you would bring it to an end.

I pray that your Spirit would form us to be a people of the cross. Help us to declare the cross with our words and display the cross with our lives. May we rest in the cross, and may we bear the image of the cross.

On this Good Friday, I pray especially for our loved ones, our friends, our family members, our co-workers, and our neighbors who do not yet know or love you.

May your Holy Spirit open their hearts. May your light shine in the darkness and bring forth life where there is death.

Thank you for the cross. And thank you that the cross is not the end of the story. Thank you for a grave that is empty. Thank you that your Son is coming soon to make all things new.

We pray this in the name of Christ, our crucified king. AMEN.

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