

His Last Days, Pt 4: The Crucifixion

Luke 23:32 ESV (Pg. 515) Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. **33** 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. **34** And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And they cast lots to divide his garments. **35** 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!” **36** The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine **37** and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” **38** There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.” **39** One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” **40** But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? **41** And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” **42** And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” **43** And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

I. “O sacred Head, now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down, now scornfully surrounded with thorns, thine only crown: how pale thou art with anguish, with sore abuse and scorn! How does that visage languish which once was bright as morn!”

A. After a night filled with agonized, solitary prayer in an olive grove (prayer so intense that he was sweating blood); after being betrayed by one of his friends, denied by another, and abandoned by them all; after 4 trials before both the Jews and the Romans, after mockery that included being spit upon, punched, and crowned with a thorn branch; after being brutally whipped, leaving his back muscles lacerated to the bone, and causing a near fatal loss of blood, Christ is now commanded to carry the crossbeam of his cross uphill to the place where his death sentence will be carried out.

1. The crossbeam weighed between 75 and 125 pounds. It was laid across his neck and shoulders, and most likely tied to his outstretched arms. Jesus was expected to carry this beam a distance of approximately 1/3 of a mile¹.

2. But in his weakened condition, this was impossible; so the Roman soldiers attending to him conscripted a man named Simon from the crowd to carry the cross to Golgotha (the “Place of the Skull”) for him.

a) Simon was from the region of Cyrene (in modern-day eastern Libya) and was probably in Jerusalem for the Passover festivities.

b) Because Simon’s name has been preserved for us, and because Mark even includes the names of his sons, Rufus and Alexander, who were with him that day (as though his readers would know exactly to whom he was referring), many commentators believe that after the events of this day, Simon’s family became early believers in Jesus².

B. Arriving atop the hill on the west side of Jerusalem, Jesus is stripped, and offered wine mixed with gall, which was an extract of either myrrh or wormwood. It was a mild analgesic meant to dull his pain and agony³.

1. But interestingly, Christ refuses this potion. He stands prepared to drink the full cup of his Father's wrath poured out for sin. He will not diminish or dilute it in any way⁴.
 2. Jesus had refused to use his divinity to shirk the full weight of the cross, but he also would take no human shortcuts, choosing to suffer the totality of judgement on human sin that came crashing in on him at this moment.
- II. "What thou, my Lord, has suffered was all for sinners' gain; mine, mine was the transgression, but thine the deadly pain. Lo, here I fall, my Savior! 'Tis I deserve thy place; look on me with thy favor, vouchsafe to me thy grace."
- A. In an act of mercy that none of us can fully understand, let alone duplicate, Christ looks at the Jews who accused him, the Romans who tormented him, and says these words: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."
 1. He says this as the cruel and mocking soldiers who had exposed him began to gamble for his clothes, trying to steal from him his last vestige of dignity and humanity.
 2. He requests forgiveness even as the mockery he endured intensified. Both the common people and the Religious leaders taunted Christ, saying things like "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" and "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"
 - B. But laying him down upon the wood, those for whom he pleaded forgiveness drove 5 to 7 inch spikes through his wrists, and into the crossbeam and raised him up onto the upright section of the cross and secured him there⁵. Once secured, they drove another spike through both of his feet and into the cross. He would hang there until he bled to death or asphyxiated.
 1. Death by asphyxiation was the most common way people died on the cross. This was because a victim of crucifixion would have to pull himself up, rubbing the exposed nerves in his wrists and feet on the nails, and his scourged back against the roughly hewn wood just in order to take a breath.
 2. Eventually exhaustion would win out, and the condemned person could no longer exert the effort required to continue breathing. This process could take as long as 3-4 days in some cases. To hasten the process of death, the Romans would often break the legs of the dying men with mallets so they could no longer lift themselves to breathe⁶.
 - C. And it was not enough that he was crucified *like* a common criminal. He was being executed *with* common criminals. Though he was innocent (sinless, in fact!) hanging to his right and his left were condemned thieves whose crimes - and the justice demanded by them- had finally caught up with them.
 1. This was in itself a fulfillment of prophecy. Isaiah spoke of how he would be "numbered with the transgressors", even while he made intercession for them. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do".
 2. To those who heard him say it, it must have seemed that *he* needed forgiveness, but was in no position to extend it to anyone. After all, he was the one dying as any other malefactor would! But it was his purpose to intercede for transgressors while being regarded as one of them.
 - D. Luke says that even one of the criminals who had been crucified next to him joined in the crowd's reviling "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

1. But the hypocrisy of his bitter outcry was too much for other robber hanging on the other side of Christ! He angrily rebuked the other man for his blasphemies.
 2. “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.”
- E. This is a great curiosity, because Matthew says in his account that **both** thieves were reviling him. But then Luke tells us that one reviled Christ, while the other one insisted upon Jesus’ innocence. Is this a contradiction in the Bible?
1. No. A more likely explanation is that the Holy Spirit touched the heart of a man who whose soul was dark and guilty, but who now found himself dying next to the Lord on his own cross.
 2. He must have been angry, knowing that all his debts had come due and that there was no last minute appeal to be made. I can’t imagine that he felt very charitable or merciful to the poor souls dying with him that day! When he saw the crowd and chief priests mocking the man beside him, he just joined in. It seemed it was a great way to vent his rage and go out defiantly.
- F. But then as this man next to him was cursed; as he suffered the same shame and physical pain as he himself suffered, he saw that he didn’t spit bitter words of hatred at those who had put him there in return. Instead, he heard this man, in a weakened whisper, and with tears in his eyes, look down upon his enraged accusers and say, “**Father, forgive them for they know not what they do**”.
1. What would cause him to be so benevolent, so generous with compassion and forgiveness for these bloodthirsty animals? They were as undeserving as any ever could be to be forgiven, and yet this man was sincere and urgent as he begged for his Father to overlook their hypocrisy and malice.
 2. He looked to the crowd. Their curses, cruel laughter and spitting continued. They didn’t want forgiveness. It certainly didn’t seem like they thought they needed it. They thought they were delivering justice. They thought they were doing God a favor by ridding the world of this blaspheming lunatic.
- G. But looking at the bloody but gentle countenance on the man gave a sudden realization. Though the screaming crowd rejected the offer of mercy, the thief knew he needed what they despised. He’d been a rebel; always in trouble. He had made many excuses, but he always knew he was guilty, and now a day of justice had come at long last. What was happening to him was his rightful due.
1. But if Christ would offer mercy to his accusers, who showed no remorse or intention to repent, what would he do if someone **asked** for mercy? The sign above his head said he was King of the Jews! What if he **was** the long-awaited Messiah? If so, this cross could not be the end of his story.
 2. So he would ask the King for mercy; to be remembered. The worst Jesus could say is “no”. Then his fate would be no worse than he imagined. So with all the volume he could muster, yet with trembling voice, he makes his request: “**Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.**”
- H. Jesus, barely alive, slowly and painfully turns his head to gaze at the man. What would he say? Why should such a vile sinner be given such a tremendous

honor? Yet through raspy gasps, forced from his battered body, the man clearly heard Jesus say, **“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”**

1. Could it be? Was he **forgiven** even as he hung condemned? Was he **welcomed** even as he had been cast out? Was he **loved** even as he had been despised, and abused? Though the physical pain did not subside, a strange peace overwhelmed the man as he considered Jesus’ words...
 - a) **“Today”**...he would not have to wait for this blessing. He would not have to clean himself up, or work his way up. Though his death was imminent, joy would be his before the sun had set that evening!
 - b) **“You will be with me”**...No more would he be an embarrassment, no more the black sheep of his family, or an outcast from respectable society, he had been **accepted** into the eternal presence of Israel’s forever King and Messiah, with nothing to prove or earn!
 - c) **“In Paradise”**...What a contrast was his promised destination to his present circumstance! Soon this searing pain would be gone. This shameful humiliation would be erased. Soon because of the free gift of undeserved mercy, love and forgiveness, everything would change.
- III. **“What language shall I borrow to thank thee, dearest friend, for this thy dying sorrow, thy pity without end? O make me thine forever; and should I fainting be, Lord, let me never, never outlive my love for thee.”**
 - A. This is the point of the cross. It is the burning, beating epicenter of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The beautiful, innocent Son of God absorbing the full brunt of God’s holy wrath against sin, so that we who are guilty and standing condemned before him could be fully forgiven and fully reconciled.
 1. The theological designation for this concept is “justification”. It means that because of the mercy and grace of Jesus our substitute, if I believe, I am regarded by God “just-as-if-I-never-sinned”.
 2. Justification is never made for the morally upright because they are morally upright. The socially acceptable cannot “schmooze” their way in. The wise cannot think their way in. The strong cannot force their way in. The rich cannot buy their way in.
 - B. Only those who believe can be justified. Only those who demonstrate that belief by saying (like the thief), “Jesus, remember me!” can be justified.
 1. **Galatians 3:10 ESV** For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.”
 2. It doesn’t matter if you’re a hobo or a millionaire; a professional wrestler or a 98 pound weakling; a Pharisee or a dying thief! The way of salvation is the same for everyone...and it always goes straight through the cross.
 - C. **Romans 10:9b ESV** if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. **10** For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. **11** For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” **12** For there is no distinction between Jew and

Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. **13** For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

- IV. There is an admitted tension in my belief system. I do not for a minute believe or teach that a true Christian can ever lose their salvation; and yet I ask Jesus to save me almost every day. Is that not a contradiction? I don't think so.
 - A. You see, I want the Lord of Life, who saved my spirit from sin, death and hell to save my mind from apathy, depression, anger, lust, and hypocrisy. I want him to save me from all the idols I routinely find tucked away in the closets of my secret desires. I want him to save me from the clutches of an aggressive and merciless tyrant named “self” that battles him for control on a daily basis.
 - B. So how will I be saved? By crying out to him constantly, “Jesus, remember me! Jesus, change me and make me holy! Jesus, save me!” And that is why I insist on coming often to the table of the Lord. What better opportunity to plead with him to remember me than when I am remembering him. His cross. His agony. His death. I remember that he was counted with my kind -the transgressors- and yet made intercession for my kind with the perfect sacrifice on the cross.
 - 1. Tom Hall calls the table our weekly opportunity to “re-up” with Jesus. As we have considered his sacrifice this evening, let us come to this table thinking about his body and blood and ask him to remember us; to save us.
 - 2. **1 Corinthians 11:23 ESV** For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” **25** In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” **26** For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

¹ Edwards, William & J Gabel, W & E Hosmer, F. (1986). On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ. JAMA : the journal of the American Medical Association. 255. 1455-63. 10.1001/jama.1986.03370110077025.

² <https://derekzrismawy.com/2013/04/10/who-were-rufus-and-alexander-why-are-they-in-the-bible/>

³ <https://www.gotquestions.org/gall-in-the-Bible.html>

⁴ <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/why-did-jesus-refuse-to-drink-the-wine-mixed-with-gall/106242.htm>

⁵ Edwards, William & J Gabel, W & E Hosmer, F. (1986). On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ. JAMA : the journal of the American Medical Association. 255. 1455-63. 10.1001/jama.1986.03370110077025.

⁶ ibid