

Luke 23:33-49

The Crucifixion

In American politics, one of the more often debated issues is the death penalty, and one of the reasons it is so fervently debated, is that the motives surrounding its use have evolved over time. In early American history, the death penalty was usually performed by hanging. Capital punishment was quite prevalent and was used for three reasons. First, it was done publically to be seen as a deterrent to other criminals who might be considering a life of crime. Second, it was done publically to give the condemned an opportunity to ask forgiveness and to cleanse his or her soul before they met eternity. And finally, it was done publically to allow the local area a chance to purge itself from guilt.

Over time, though, it was considered inappropriate, and downright cruel, to hold public executions, and hanging was significantly less precise than it appears in the movies. So, executions were moved inside the penitentiary where the condemned was executed by newer, and theoretically more humane, methods such as electrocution. As time continued, the emphasis on developing more humane methods of carrying out the sentence, and more and more private settings, has caused the original purpose of capital punishment to be reconsidered.

The ancient Romans had no such qualms about executing their criminals. Nor did they have much debate about a public versus a private setting. The condemned were killed publically and painfully. In fact, Roman thinking was that the more gruesome the horror, the more likely the punishment was to serve as a deterrent to others.

By this point in our narrative, Jesus had lost everything. He had lost His friends, His freedom, His rights, and His honor. He had been betrayed and deserted by those closest to Him, He had been arrested, He had been unjustly tried, and He had been stripped and beaten. He had been mocked by His accusers and was now being led away to die. To those enforcing the punishment, it was a joke. They mocked Him by giving Him a coarse cloak for a robe and a crown of thorns. They bowed down to Him as if He were a king. Since the Romans were none too fond of the Jews anyway, this execution only provided additional sport to mock the people they ruled by mocking their would be king.

But the Jews, too, participated in the joke. To them the idea of a dying Messiah was ridiculous. It was absurd. It defied everything they expected. They wanted a coronation not a crucifixion. Thus both groups represented the painful truth about what Scripture says about those who reject Christ. “For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God . . . Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness” (1 Corinthians 1:18, 23).

But to God this was no joke. It was the fulfillment of His eternal, sovereign plan. The cross and the resurrection proved Jesus was Who He said He was. It validated not only His own words, but that of Old Testament prophecy as well. For example, more than four hundred years before the first historical evidence of crucifixion, Isaiah wrote, “but He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities” (Isaiah 53:5).

The first evidence of crucifixion we find in the historical record dates to the 6th century BC and occurs in ancient Persia. Darius (c. 550-486 BC) ordered the execution of over three thousand Babylonians by this new method. Later, history shows that Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) made use of crucifixion to eliminate more than two thousand people of the city of Tyre who had opposed his rulership. Even the Jews took advantage of this form of execution. The Hasmonean king Alexander Jannaeus (r. 103-76 BC) killed nearly one thousand rebels by this means.

By the time of the Roman occupation of Israel, the process of crucifixion had been developed to a point of perfection. It should not surprise us that in each of the four gospels absolutely no details were given regarding crucifixion. That Jesus was crucified was simply stated in a matter of three or four words (three in Greek and four in English translation). That was because crucifixion was so well known at the time of the writing of the gospels, no description was necessary. So public were the Romans in using this method, that they often crucified people along roads so any passers by would be reminded of the punishments for those opposed to Roman power.

We do not know the exact location of the place where Jesus was crucified. A few different sites have been suggested by archaeologists or biblical scholars. Tradition has it that Jesus was crucified on a hill, though that is not mentioned in the biblical text. It would not be unusual though, since the Romans liked to give all who might take note a good view of Roman discipline. Luke informs us that the place was called "The Skull" (v. 33) (Latin, *Calvaria*; Aramaic, *Golgotha*), either because of its geographic resemblance to the shape of a skull, or because of what took place there. The idea that it was so called because of the numerous skulls lying around left unburied is unlikely, as the Jews would have been deeply offended by such a practice.

In volume 255, number 11, of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (pdf online), author William Edwards provides a detailed, yet readable, description of the process Jesus underwent. The victim was first scourged with a lash to which pieces of bone and metal had been attached. Slumped over a stump or other object, the victim was thrashed from the base of his neck to his knees. Then, with their arms were tied to the crossbeam with leather straps, the victim carried their cross to the place of execution. Once there, they were nailed to the cross beam through their wrists with spikes about six inches long. The weight of the body would be supported by the bones in the forearms.

The beam was then lifted up and attached to the main post. The legs were bent and the feet nailed together with a single spike. This allowed the victim to push himself up to breathe, but if the process of dying was taking too long, the legs could be broken to speed up the process. Lack of sufficient oxygen led to muscle cramping. As the victim slowly suffocated, they could only gain breath by pushing themselves up along the wooden post. Remember that their back had been scourged, so this involved tremendous pain. Death would be proved by piercing the chest with a long spear and discerning the serous pleural and pericardial fluid that flowed out. This mixture of blood and water gave irrefutable proof that the victim had perished. Our English word 'excruciating' is derived from the Latin word meaning "out of the cross." It is no surprise.

The Contrast

One of the most striking elements of the crucifixion was the contrast between those in the crowd and Jesus. Among the masses at the crucifixion, four different groups draw our attention. The first was “the people [who] stood by, looking on” (v. 35). These were those who had shouted “hosanna” not a week earlier, but who now screamed “crucify Him” at the top of their lungs. Some had been curious, some had been amazed, some, perhaps had even been tempted to follow this rabbi. But in the end they were fickle and unwilling to follow Jesus.

A second group were the “the rulers [who] were sneering at Him, saying, ‘He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One’” (v. 35). To them the crucifixion was the consummation of three years of hatred. It fulfilled their preconceptions regarding Jesus. “²²If a man has committed a sin worthy of death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, ²³his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day (for he who is hanged is accursed of God), so that you do not defile your land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance” (Deuteronomy 21:22-23). They can best be described as feeling satisfied and vindicated.

The third group were some “³⁶soldiers [who] also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, ³⁷and saying, ‘if You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!’” (v. 36-37). With a juvenile sense of humor, they simply employed themselves in a continuation of the mocking that had begun at the praetorium. How misunderstanding they were! Jesus did not come here to save Himself.

Their mocking was reflected in the sign that hung over the head of Jesus. Luke wrote that there was an inscription above Him reading, “This is the King of the Jews” (v. 38). Compiling the accounts in all four gospel narratives, we learn that the full text read “This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” Ironically, what was supposed to hang above the head of the victim was a list of the crimes for which he was being executed. The Jewish leaders had objected to such a sign, which was to suggest that being a King of the Jews was a crime worth crucifixion. But Pilate, clearly annoyed by the entire scene, told them “what I have written I have written” (John 19:22).

Others among the Roman military presence sought to use their time more wisely than merely insulting a dying man. Instead, “they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves” (v. 34). John’s narrative provides more detail. “²³Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His outer garments and made four parts, a part to every soldier and also the tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece. ²⁴So they said to one another, ‘let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, to decide whose it shall be’” (John 19:23-24). This seemingly meaningless detail also fulfilled Scripture,

“They divide my garments among them,
And for my clothing they cast lots” (Psalm 22:18).

The final group were “the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left” (v. 33). They had suffered the same treatment as Jesus, but their response to their circumstances could not have been more different. The more vocal of the two “was hurling abuse at Him, saying, ‘are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!’” (v. 39).

Each of the elements of this crowd must be contrasted with Jesus. Despite the pain, despite the humiliation, Jesus looked down from the cross and said “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (v. 34). He did not utter threats of judgment, though He certainly could have done. Neither did He simply allow things to progress naturally and allow the men beneath Him to receive the consequence of their actions. Instead, He actively appealed to God the Father on their behalf. He did not seek vengeance, He sought pardon. This, too, fulfilled Scripture,

“Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great,
And He will divide the booty with the strong;
Because He poured out Himself to death,
And was numbered with the transgressors;
Yet He Himself bore the sin of many,
And interceded for the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:12).

In addition to marveling at the inconceivable grace of Jesus, we can also take away the fact that if Jesus was willing to seek the pardon of those who crucified Him, certainly He is willing to advocate on our behalf as He sits at the right hand of God the Father today. There can be no sin for which a repentant sinner will not find forgiveness.

The efficacy of this prayer was seen at the moment. Among those who were forgiven for their sins was a centurion. As Matthew recounts, “now the centurion, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, ‘truly this was the Son of God!’” (Matthew 27:54).

The Conversion

And another who benefitted from this prayer was one of the criminals. Luke’s narrative contains the only account of this event; the other gospel writers omit it. As the crucifixion began this criminal, like the other, was taking part in the mocking of Jesus. As Matthew reminds us, “the robbers who had been crucified with Him were also insulting Him with the same words” (Matthew 27:44). But at some point, the Holy Spirit intervened, and this man was transformed. As the one criminal continued to hurl abuse at Jesus, “the other answered, and rebuking him said, ‘do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?’” (v. 40). This was a conversion as remarkable as Paul’s.

Though much debate about this “deathbed conversion” has occurred in Christian circles throughout the years, Luke offered several demonstrations that the man’s conversion was genuine. First, as stated, the man had come to genuinely fear the Lord and His judgment. He expressed the understanding that there was a righteous God whom he would soon be facing. One of the characteristics of unbelievers is that they have no fear of God. They have no sense of needing to repent, because they have nothing to fear from dying. That was not so for this repentant criminal.

Related to this, is a second argument Luke used to demonstrate the criminal’s conversion. Luke wrote that the man continued, “we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds” (v. 41). In other words, this man understood that he was a sinner. He understood that the condemnation he was under by an earthly judge was just. He was only getting what he deserved. He

made no claim to anything to excuse his behavior. He did not try to justify his sins. He simply stated that he was getting just what he deserved.

Further evidence of the genuineness of his conversion is that the man expressed belief in Jesus. He stated categorically, “this man has done nothing wrong” (v. 41). He not only acknowledged his own sinfulness, but the sinlessness of Jesus. Again, he made no claim to have merited anything from Jesus. He pleaded only for grace. “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!” (v. 42). What a statement! To what kingdom could he possibly have been referring. Jesus was dying. There was no earthly hope. The only kingdom that could be possible was a heavenly one. An eternal kingdom. This could only be accomplished if the dying king was resurrected. Simply put, he was acknowledging Jesus to be the Messiah. By the power of the Holy Spirit, this convicted criminal, sentenced to die for his crimes, came to understand the true meaning of the kingdom of God.

Saving souls to the last, Jesus graciously responded, “truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.” (v. 43). We cannot imagine the relief and sense of peace that came over that man upon hearing these words. He was hours from death, with no hope other than the man being crucified beside him. His only hope was Jesus, but then that is true for each of us as well.

As a point of understanding, this undermines the doctrine offered by many of a state of purgatory into which our souls must go upon death in order to be cleansed of any unforgiven sins for which we have not done penance. It also removes any argument for a works-based salvation suggested by so many cults. What possible good works could the man do? How could he now possibly earn his salvation? He was on a cross and was coming down only after he had died. Clearly his sins had been significant, for he was condemned to die for his crimes. He could not save himself in any sense of that word. Only by faith in Jesus was he, or anyone, saved. And that salvation is once and for all, and it is effective immediately upon conversion.

It is Finished

The morning had passed. “It was now about the sixth hour” or noon (v. 44). Over the next three hours, many unimaginable events would take place. And they would mark the significance of the crucifixion for all who were there.

First, Luke informs us that “darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour” (v. 44). What was the cause of the astronomical phenomenon? First we must say that Scripture does not state the geographic extent of the darkness. It may have been localized, or it may have encompassed the entire world. We do know that it was not caused by an eclipse, because an eclipse does not last for three hours. Also, Passover was always held during a full moon, and there cannot be a solar eclipse during a full moon.

Darkness had long been associated with God’s wrath. We can remember the plagues of Egypt, “²¹Then the Lord said to Moses, “stretch out your hand toward the sky, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, even a darkness which may be felt.” ²²So Moses stretched out his hand toward the sky, and there was thick darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days” (Exodus 10:21-22). We can recall any of the times God, in His wrath, appeared to one of the prophets,

“¹Blow a trumpet in Zion,
And sound an alarm on My holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
For the day of the Lord is coming;
Surely it is near,
²A day of darkness and gloom,
A day of clouds and thick darkness.
As the dawn is spread over the mountains,
So there is a great and mighty people;
There has never been anything like it,
Nor will there be again after it
To the years of many generations.” (Joel 2:1-2).

“¹⁴Near is the great day of the Lord,
Near and coming very quickly;
Listen, the day of the Lord!
In it the warrior cries out bitterly.
¹⁵A day of wrath is that day,
A day of trouble and distress,
A day of destruction and desolation,
A day of darkness and gloom,
A day of clouds and thick darkness,” (Zephaniah 1:14-15).

The wrath of God was being poured out on Jesus as He took upon Himself all of the sins of those whom God has chosen.

The second event was that “the veil of the temple was torn in two” (v. 45). This veil, some sixty feet in length and over one inch thick, was the barrier between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies in the temple. The sound of its being ripped asunder must have shocked the priests in the temple performing the ritual Passover sacrifices. It’s destruction represented the inauguration of a new covenant between God and man. No longer was the sacrificial system required. One sacrifice had been sufficient for all. The atonement was complete.

“¹¹But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; ¹²and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. ¹³For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, ¹⁴how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” (Hebrews 9:11-14).

Two other events are not recorded by Luke, but are found in other gospel accounts. Matthew wrote that “the earth shook and the rocks were split” (Matthew 27:51) indicating a powerful earthquake. Also, as a

consequence of the earthquake “⁵²the tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; ⁵³and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many” (Matthew 27:52-53). Those resurrected did not appear until after Jesus, Himself had been raised from the dead, since He was “the first fruits of those who are asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:20). But they did give further proof of the efficacy of the atonement.

The final event mention by Luke were the last words of Jesus from the cross. Gathering Himself for one last time, He shouted “with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit’” (v. 46). That He was able to speak at all is remarkable. That He was able to shout was a miracle. That the atonement was accepted and Jesus was no longer rejected by God the Father was proven.

Varying Responses

Three different responses were recorded by Luke. The first was a Roman soldier who had participated in the crucifixion. “When the centurion saw what had happened, he began praising God, saying, ‘certainly this man was innocent’” (v. 47). Whatever had been the opinion of this centurion before (he most likely was just doing his daily job) he was now convinced. The words of Jesus promising forgiveness to a dying criminal, the darkness and the earthquake, and Jesus’ loud cry to His Father at the end, all of this compelled this Roman soldier to acknowledge Jesus and praise God for what had happened. He did not merely acknowledge that Jesus was innocent. As Matthew relates, he affirmed that “truly this was the Son of God!” (Matthew 27:54).

A second response was seen in the behavior of the crowds. “All the crowds who came together for this spectacle, when they observed what had happened, began to return, beating their breasts” (v. 48). They were overwhelmed by what they had seen. Their mocking had ceased. They saw their guilt. They were grieved at what they had done. Too late, they had realized this was the Messiah. But there was still time. In God's grace, we can hope that many of these were present at Pentecost and came to faith then.

The final response was in a group that, thus far had been mentioned in Luke's narrative. “All His acquaintances and the women who accompanied Him from Galilee were standing at a distance, seeing these things” (v. 49). We cannot feel what they felt. They had seen Jesus. They had walked with Him, His mother had raised Him. Perhaps they had tried to stay close to Jesus as He walked to Calvary. They had been near the cross. But their grief had proved too much. They shrank back from the horror. They simply couldn't watch. Their Son, their friend, their Savior had died. We cannot imagine their heartbreak. But it was only Friday, Sunday was coming.

Takeaways

Many emotions are evoked in a passage like this. The one that overwhelms me is gratitude. May we thank God for the immeasurable sacrifice of His Son for our sins. May we be filled with His grace to respond with lives of commitment to His work in our lives.