

Luke 23:26-32
The Road to Calvary

The Bible is filled with great figures. We have all heard the stories about Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David, Hezekiah, Isaiah, Peter, and Paul. And, there are also fascinating supporting characters in the cast, such as Nathan the prophet, and Lazarus, for example. But I am intrigued by those characters who go unmentioned by name in Scripture. I wonder about the man who let Jesus use His donkey for the ride into Jerusalem. I wish I knew more about the men who were the servants at the wedding at Cana. I am interested in the innkeeper who had no room for a young, pregnant girl.

In today's passage, we have come to the final, earthly, pre-glorified, scene of the life of Jesus. We have come to the moment when "He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11). We have come to the crucifixion.

In an temporal sense, this journey began more than three decades ago in a small village outside the very city in which Jesus now ended His life. He began in a stable, and He ended on a cross.

His life did not begin auspiciously. As an infant, He was hunted by a king. His family escaped, and He grew up in an insignificant little village in an insignificant part of the Roman empire. About thirty years passed before anyone outside of His family and some locals knew of Him. He traveled to the Jordan River to be baptized by a prophet, who himself was unpopular with the local rulers. He then returned to His hometown and though rejected there, continued to preach, heal, and minister to the needs of those in the area. He spoke of the coming of the kingdom of God. He proclaimed Himself to be the Messiah, long awaited by the Jews. Eventually, He began to make His way to Jerusalem, the spiritual center of His people. Most hoped that His appearance there would inaugurate a new age of the people of Israel. That the Roman oppressors would be expelled and the kingdom of Israel restored to its rightful place among the nations.

But that was not why Jesus went to Jerusalem. His agenda was different. He had not come to establish an earthly kingdom, but a spiritual one. He had not come to reign, but to die. As people began to recognize this, they turned against Him. The religious leaders, never wanting His success, were able to turn the crowds against Him. The "hosannas" of Monday became the "crucify Him" of Friday. So it is on Friday morning that we find Him, a convicted criminal on His way to be executed.

But in an eternal sense, this was the completion of a plan sovereignly ordained in eternity past. His mother had been told before He was even born that she "will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). The Old Testament prophets had foretold of His coming centuries before. The details of His birth, life, and especially His death had been announced to all who would listen. This was no tragedy. This was a triumph. This was the fulfillment of God's perfect plan to redeem His people.

The Instigators

So, after Pilate had given in to the mob and pronounced sentence on Jesus, “they led Him away” (v. 26). In order to not offend the vast Jewish population of Jerusalem, executions took place outside the city. This was to respect, at least ostensibly, the requirements of Leviticus 24:14, “bring the one who has cursed outside the camp, and let all who heard him lay their hands on his head; then let all the congregation stone him.” Stoning had fallen into disuse by the Roman rulers, instead they preferred crucifixion. Part of the punishment involved forcing the victim to carry the very instrument on which he would be crucified. Thus the accused was required to carry the crossbeam of the cross to the place of execution (though some commentators suggest the victim was required to carry the entire cross).

It could not have been expected that Jesus would be able to perform that task. Think of the last several hours. He had been kept up all night and beaten on at least two occasions (by the Sanhedrin and then by soldiers in the praetorium). He had then been scourged. His body was aching, His muscles were weak, His blood sugar levels dangerously low. He had not eaten for more than fifteen hours.

The ‘they’ can only refer to the members of the Sanhedrin. These religious leaders, including both the current and former high priests, must have been jubilant in their triumph. They finally had this rebellious rabbi. Undoubtedly there were others as well who now joined the procession. These would have included scribes and Pharisees who had opposed, and been frustrated by, Jesus. Certainly there were Herodians. They were loyal to Herod and his family and had wondered at this presumptuous king of the Jews. Roman soldiers must also have been part of the procession, as they had the gruesome task of carrying out the execution.

So, Jesus was led away. Ever technical, the word Luke employed is a legal term used to describe those led to some form of criminal punishment. He would later use that same word to describe events surrounding Peter.

“¹⁸Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter. ¹⁹When Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution” (Acts 12:18-19).

These religious leaders had had every opportunity to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. They had heard Him preach, seen Him heal, and witnessed countless other miracles attesting to His claims. Their own self-righteousness and hard-heartedness was to blame. They have become representative of all who have rejected Christ.

“⁴For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame” (Hebrews 6:4-6).

The Stranger

As Jesus began to slow His pace, stumble, and give every indication that He would not be able to carry the cross to its destination, the Roman soldiers took advantage of their prerogative and called a man out of the crowd. Scanning the masses “they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, coming in from the country, and placed on him the cross to carry behind Jesus” (v. 26). He was a Cyrenian, or a person from Cyrene. This town was situated on a plateau about ten miles inland from the Mediterranean Sea on the coast of, what is today, Libya.

Some have argued that since the record shows Cyrus gave his children Gentile names, he was not Jewish. That is unlikely, since many Jews followed that particular practice. Also, Cyrene had a significant Jewish population, as there was a synagogue there and its members were mentioned in Scripture on four occasions (Acts 2:10, 6:9, 11:20; 13:1). The Jewish historian Josephus assures us that the town of Cyrene had a significant Jewish population.

It is not known how much Simon knew about Jesus. If he was in Jerusalem for the Passover, as seems most likely, perhaps he had arrived in time to witness the triumphal entry of Jesus earlier that week. Perhaps he had made his way to the temple and there stopped for a while to hear Jesus teach and refute the Pharisees and Sadducees. Perhaps not. It can be that he had only arrived in Jerusalem in the last two days, and participated in Passover and was simply along the road when Jesus and the crowds passed by.

However the human circumstances of the event occurred, we can be certain that Simon was not chosen randomly. God simply does not work like that. But we are left to speculate as to the events that followed. It is reasonable to infer that Simon carried the cross to Calvary and then remained to witness the crucifixion. Did the behavior of Jesus, His words of forgiveness and humility, make such an impression on Simon that he came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah? We do know that Mark, in writing of this same event, added that Simon was “the father of Alexander and Rufus” (Mark 15:21). An interesting footnote. Since Mark was writing to a largely Gentile audience in Rome, he must have had some sense that these people would be recognized by his readers. Simon’s children, at least, had become valued members of the Roman church. This notion is confirmed by Paul who, in closing his letter to the church at Rome, asked those who received his epistle to “greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord, also his mother and mine” (Romans 16:13). Apparently Simon had died, but the faith he received at Calvary impacted his wife and sons.

So, we can conclude from this that the forcing of Simon to carry the cross of Jesus, was a factor leading him to conversion, and that the faith he received was passed on to those in his family. It also impacted the town of Cyrene. When Simon returned there, he must have shared what he had experienced. He must have told others of the crucifixion. Over time, God used his testimony, along with others from Cyrene who were in Jerusalem for Pentecost (Acts 2:10), to build His church there. Their faith proved strong. Though many in the early church faded after the martyrdom of Stephen, Luke writes that

“¹⁹those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. ²⁰But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and

began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:19-21).

In other words, while others were reluctant to preach to anyone, or only to Jews, those men from Cyprus and Cyrene let no boundaries inhibit the sharing of their faith. Their church grew both in numbers and in faith and eventually one of its own was a leader in the great Christian church at Antioch. “Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul” (Acts 13:1). What a testimony from a minor character, unknown to the world until the road to Calvary.

The Crowd

Among those found at any given time with Jesus, we have seen that there were at least three groups. First were His disciples and other close followers. These were those who had “left everything and followed Him” (Luke 5:11). Others were sympathetic and interested, and but who nonetheless refused to make a commitment. Finally, there were the simply curious. These were those usually described by the gospel writers as being amazed. They were astonished at the miracles and profound teaching, but the truth only impacted on the surface of their souls.

As Jesus made His way to Calvary, “following Him was a large crowd of the people” (v. 27). No doubt all three groups mingled in this crowd. They all witnessed the same heroic struggle. They all would hear the words spoken at the cross. But some had clearly been disappointed in Jesus. He had not fulfilled their expectations. He had come to Jerusalem proclaimed as a king, yet He had confronted only His own - the religious leaders and those who ran the temple. The Romans He had left undisturbed. And, He kept talking about dying, and these people had no room in their theology for a dying Messiah.

Their disillusionment had reached the point where they were easily persuaded to turn against this frustrating rabbi and demand He be crucified. Perhaps they thought they would have better luck with the insurrectionist and murderer Barabbas. At least he was a man of action.

Ironically, after the crucifixion, these same people regretted their actions. Perhaps they had hoped until the very end that Jesus might really be the Messiah. Perhaps He might save Himself, as His enemies mockingly called upon Him to do. For when He died, scripture records that “all the crowds who came together for this spectacle, when they observed what had happened, began to return, beating their breasts” (Luke 23:48).

The crowd represented all those who throughout the years, are amazed at Christ, consider Him a great teacher or humanitarian, and even admire His ethical way of life. But they never place their faith in Him. They never commit. They never call Him Lord. And they perish because of it.

The Women

Among the crowd were “women who were mourning and lamenting Him” (v. 27). We must understand that these women did not include Mary His mother, Mary Magdalene, or any of the other women who

followed Jesus and supported His ministry who had earlier been mentioned by Luke. “²And also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses: Mary who was called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward, and Susanna, and many others who were contributing to their support out of their private means” (Luke 8:2-3).

It was traditional for women to mourn at a time of death. Some of them may have been deeply moved, others may have just been caught up in the emotion of the moment. It is fascinating to note that of all the people recorded in Scripture as expressing hostility to Jesus, none of them are women. Jesus treated women with dignity and grace, and this despite the low social standing of women at the times. Jesus stood out in many ways, and His treatment of women was no exception.

This mourning was an intensely physical act. It involved the beating of the chest and loud, wailing cries. This deep lamentation reflected sympathy with Jesus and regret at the treatment He was receiving. But it was not an act of faith in His Messiahship. These women, like so many others, did not hate Jesus or wish Him ill, but neither did they believe in and follow Him. They were simply upset at the treatment He received by a cruel world.

Remarkably, even at this stage, Jesus continued to impart wisdom. Despite the physical pain and fatigue, His concern was still for others. “Jesus turning to them said, ‘daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children’” (v. 28). The word ‘daughters’ was often used as a metaphor for Israel as a nation. In case the point was missed, by way of explanation, Jesus added “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’” (v. 29-30). This was a paraphrase of Hosea 8:10,

“Also the high places of Aven, the sin of Israel, will be destroyed;
Thorn and thistle will grow on their altars;
Then they will say to the mountains,
‘Cover us!’ And to the hills, ‘fall on us!’”

In that context, Hosea was referring to the judgment God would extend to Israel due to their apostasy. Though they would seek shelter from God’s wrath, none would be found. Though this would be fulfilled in a temporal sense with the destruction of Jerusalem by Roman armies in AD 70, it was a sentiment prophesied again in Revelation,

“¹⁵Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; ¹⁶and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, ‘fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; ¹⁷for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?’” (Revelation 6:15-17).

This was the future, eternal punishment, reserved for those who reject God.

Barrenness was the worst fear of any Jewish woman. A quick remembrance of women such as Hannah and Mary, herself, will suffice to make the case. To consider such a woman blessed was an extreme reversal of values. In other words, Jesus was stating that the judgment to come would be so horrible, that those with children would feel its wrath all the more, perhaps because of the heartbreak of knowing their children were doomed to destruction as well. “Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days; for there will be great distress upon the land and wrath to this people” (Luke 21:23).

Jesus then referenced a Jewish proverb. “For if they do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?” (v. 31). The point was that if God allowed His righteous judgment to fall on Him, certainly those who persisted in their unbelief could not avoid punishment. The women were weeping for the wrong person. Jesus had nothing to fear from God’s judgment. He was perfectly holy and sinless. He had acted in perfect accordance with the will of God the Father. These women, on the other hand, who had yet to receive faith, were destined to a much more horrible eternity.

The Criminals

There were two others on this same road. Their destination was the same. The inevitability of their death was as certain. As Luke tersely recounts, “two others also, who were criminals, were being led away to be put to death with Him” (v. 32). These may have been collaborators with Barabbas in his insurrection. But unlike, him, they had not been reprieved.

Eventually one of these men would come to faith.

“³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, ‘are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!’ ⁴⁰But the other answered, and rebuking him said, ‘do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.’ ⁴²And he was saying, ‘Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!’ ⁴³And He said to him, ‘truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise’” (Luke 23:39-43).

Together they represent all of humanity. There are those who, until the very end, reject Jesus. And there are those who, at some point in their lives, either early or at the last hour, receive faith. We will meet these men in more detail later.

Takeaways

We have encountered several minor characters along the road to Calvary. There were religious leaders, a random man standing along the way, the crowds who continued to be amazed, several weeping women, and two criminals on the way to meet their death. Each possessed a soul. Each had an eternal destiny. Each had an encounter with Christ and was responsible for their response. We must remember that with God there are no minor characters. With God there are no random acts. With God what matters is our response to Jesus the Messiah. Let us “therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession” (Hebrews 3:1).