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THE KING ON THE CROSS

Luke 23:26-49

By

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Luke Lesson 107

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I always feel inadequate to preach, but I never feel more inadequate than when I preach on the crucifixion of Jesus. There is simply no way that I can do justice to this most profound event in the history of the world. Meditating on the cross of Christ should evoke many feelings in our hearts: mourning for our sin that put Him there; horror at God's dreadful judgment that required such a price; gratitude for the great love and mercy of the Savior; and awe at the fact that such as One as He would do such a thing as this for such a sinner as I. Yet I lack the ability to set forth all of these things as they ought to be explained and applied. And so we all must cast ourselves afresh on God and pray that He would use His Word in our hearts beyond my ability to preach and beyond your ability to listen.

Today I am going to present an overview of the crucifixion as described by the Holy Spirit through Luke. In subsequent weeks, I am going to go back and pick out some of the details that call for more meditation than a single message allows. Today I want to set before you four broad themes that the cross displays:

The cross displays the awfulness of human sin, God's dreadful judgment, His amazing love, and His amazing Savior.

1. The cross displays the awfulness of human sin.

Down through history, wicked men have done some terrible things: slaughtered innocent women and children, tortured people for pleasure, and resorted to cannibalism and other evils too hideous to mention. But never has the human race stooped so low as when they crucified the Lord of glory and mocked Him while He was hanging on the cross. The horror of violence is proportionate to the innocence of the victim. If one mobster shoots another mobster, we tend to say, "That's too bad, but he had it coming."

But if a man tortures and murders a little child, we recoil in horror, because the child did nothing to deserve such terrible treatment. But while children are *relatively* innocent, Jesus alone is

truly innocent and undefiled (Heb. 7:26). He was never tainted by sin in thought, word, or deed. He gave up the glory of heaven and came to this earth, not for Himself, but to lay down His life for sinners. He went about doing good to all. His teaching and His miracles proved Him to be God's anointed one, or Messiah. For men to disregard all of His miracles (which they tacitly admit when they say, "He saved others"), to make sport of torturing such a one, and then to jeer as He hung on the cross with His life slowly ebbing out of Him, was the most heinous crime imaginable!

The Bible says, "Men loved the darkness rather than the light, for their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). The darkness of the human heart was never as dark as when they crucified the Son of God. Thus God sent darkness over the land as a portent of His judgment to come, when men who do not repent will be cast into outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 25:30). This was not an eclipse of the sun, which is impossible during a full moon. Rather, it was a miracle sent from God so that sinful men might tremble at His power and judgment.

The hardness of the human heart is seen in that the Jewish religious leaders did not even cease their mocking, but paid no attention to this miraculous sign in the heavens. John Calvin (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], "Harmony of the Gospels," 3:317) says that "their amazing madness ought to strike us with horror," (the French edition says, "Make our hair stand on end") that they would be so blind as to ignore this warning from God. He then adds, "But this is the spirit of stupidity and of giddiness with which God intoxicates the reprobate, after having long contended with their malice." He darkens their minds, so that seeing, they do not see (Matt. 13:14).

Those who witnessed this horrific event had different reactions. The religious leaders are the most guilty, since they had seen Christ's miracles and heard His teaching, but knowingly and willfully rejected Him and even taunted Him as He died (23:35). The Roman soldiers also were guilty of mocking Him (23:36-37), but it was more out of ignorance and stupidity. Many just stood and watched out of curiosity, perhaps not knowing what to think (23:35). The thieves on the cross both mocked at first, although the one soon came to repentance (23:39-43; compare Matt. 27:44;

Mark 15:32). The multitudes, after witnessing the whole spectacle, went away beating their breasts, perhaps vaguely recognizing that something terrible had taken place (23:48). Perhaps this was the initial working of God's Spirit in convicting them of sin in preparation for Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost. Christ's acquaintances and the women who accompanied Him from Galilee stood at a distance, probably out of fear and confusion (23:49).

Luke paints this whole scene to show us not only the sin of those who crucified the Savior, but to get us to examine our own hearts. While we may not be as guilty as the religious leaders, we all are guilty: "All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him" (Isa. 53:6). Allow the spectacle of the cross to overwhelm you with the awfulness of your own sin!

2. The cross displays God's dreadful judgment against sin.

Being sinners by nature, we tend to minimize both our sin and God's wrath against sin. We think that our sin isn't all that bad, and we can't understand why God would get so worked up about it. But as Calvin explains, "It was an astonishing display of the wrath of God that he did not spare even his only begotten Son, and was not appeased in any other way than by that price of expiation" (*ibid.,* pp. 316-317). "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), and nothing less than the death of God's own Son could satisfy His holy wrath that is justly due for our sin!

God's judgment is seen in several ways in this story. I've already mentioned the darkened sun as one portent of the wrath to come. It should have made every person there shake with fear and cry out for God's mercy. Also, Jesus warned the daughters of Jerusalem who wept for Him of the coming judgment on the city. For the Jews, children were God's blessings; it was a curse to be barren. But Jesus warned that the days were coming when they would say, "Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed" (23:29). So great would be the suffering and slaughter, that it would be better not to have children than to watch them starve and be hacked to pieces by the Roman swords. At that time, men would call to the mountains to fall on them, since that would be a more merciful form of death than what awaited them. If it was unnatural for Jesus, the "green tree," to be

burned, how much worse would it be when God's judgment was poured out on the guilty, dried up nation, ready for the fire?

But God's temporal judgments on Jerusalem were nothing in comparison with the eternal judgment that Jesus often warned about. He used the most descriptive language to picture the torments of hell. In addition to describing it as a place of outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, He called it a place "where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48). He pictured the rich man in torment, crying out for a wet finger to cool his tongue, "for I am in agony in this flame" (Luke 16:24).

Sometimes I think we err in focusing on the physical suffering of Jesus on the cross, while we miss the fact that it was just a glimpse of the spiritual agony He endured. It is significant that none of the four gospels use much detail to describe His physical suffering. Luke simply says, "They crucified Him" (23:33). Granted, most of his readers had witnessed crucifixions, so they knew the awful suffering it entailed. It was one of the most horrific, slow, tortuous deaths ever invented. But I think that G. Campbell Morgan is right when he says that he often wished that no one had painted a picture of the crucifixion. He explains,

> I am not denying the tragedy of the physical, but I often feel that in connection with our children, we are in danger if we talk too much with them of the nails and the thorns and the spear. These were merely the incidentals, all of them necessary, I grant you, to work out into visibility before these poor human eyes of ours, something of the unfathomable sorrows of God in Christ in the Cross. Yet there is always a danger lest for very pity of heart, we become more occupied with the physical suffering, than with the spiritual agony. (*The Gospel According to Luke* [Revell], pp. 266-267.)

The point of Christ's suffering on the cross was that He bore God's dreadful judgment that we deserved, thus satisfying His wrath for us. If Christ crucified is your Savior, you will escape the day of God's wrath on sinners. As Paul triumphantly puts it, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).

I must underscore that you cannot eliminate or skim over this point about the cross revealing God's wrath against sin and be a true Christian. In my next point I will talk about God's amazing love as seen in the cross, and it is true. But to skim over God's wrath and rush on to His love is to miss the offense of the cross. That offense is that we are sinners deserving of God's judgment. We can do nothing in ourselves to appease that judgment. What we cannot do, God did, not sparing His own Son, so that no one can boast before God.

James Stalker points out how that, just as in Christ's day there were religious men who said, "Come down from the cross and we will believe you," so there are still such men. He says, that they "have no sense of their own unworthiness or of the majesty and the rights of a holy God. They do not understand a theology of sin and punishment, of atonement and redemption; and all the deep significance of His death has to be taken out of Christianity before they will believe it" (*The Trial and Death of Jesus Christ* [Zondervan], pp. 103-104). So we must see in the cross the awfulness of human sin and the dreadfulness of God's judgment before we move on to the next point.

3. The cross displays God's amazing love toward sinners.

As Charles Wesley put it in his great hymn, "Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou my God shouldst die for me!" That is the only explanation for why Jesus did what He did. If He had stood on His rights, He would have said, "They deserve what they have coming. Let them all pay for their own sin! Why should I have to suffer in their place?" Thank God that He drank the cup of God's wrath because of His unfathomable love!

That love is seen in what is called Christ's first words from the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (23:34). I hope to deal with this verse in more detail in a later message. In passing, I will say that although many weighty early New Testament manuscripts do not contain the verse, there are reasons to believe that it was a part of Luke's original gospel. Christ's words here breathe the same spirit that He taught in the Sermon on the Plain, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (6:27-28).

Just as the gardener in Jesus' parable asked the owner of the fig tree to give it another year (13:6-9), so Jesus here pleads for another chance for this guilty nation (Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* [Eerdmans], pp. 608-609). And, God, who could have made the ground open and swallow these rebels on the spot, because He is full of love and mercy, answered the prayer by giving Israel 40 more years before judgment fell. He sent them the preaching of Peter on the Day of Pentecost and the ministry of the apostles and other believers, and many thousands came to repentance and faith.

We should learn here what Calvin calls the astonishing (p. 291), inestimable (p. 302) love of God towards us in Christ. He further notes (p. 303) that all the sufferings that Christ endured are here portrayed so that we may see more clearly how much our salvation cost Him. When we reflect that we justly deserved what He endured, we might more and more be moved to repentance. And, Calvin says, God here plainly shows us how wretched our condition would have been if we had not a Redeemer.

Christ's prayer for those who so badly mistreated Him should give hope to the worst of sinners. Yes, you have abused and mistreated the Savior by your life of sin. Yes, your sin put Jesus on the cross. You need forgiveness. And forgiveness is precisely what Jesus prays on behalf of guilty sinners! He doesn't offer it based on your deserving it, but simply because of His great love and mercy. It cost Him dearly, but it is free to you if you will receive it. The cross reveals God's amazing love for sinners.

4. The cross reveals God's amazing Savior for sinners.

Luke wants every eye to be on the marvelous person of Jesus Christ. The titles that His enemies mockingly hurled at Him are true, even though they did not believe. He *is* "the Christ of God, His Chosen One" (23:35). He *is* "the King of the Jews" (23:37, 38). He *is* the innocent (or righteous) one (23:47), who had done nothing wrong (23:41). Note these five contrasts about His person:

- Jesus is fully human, yet fully divine.

As a man, Jesus was so weak from His night in the garden and His scourging that He could not even bear His own cross. His terrible physical suffering on the cross shows His full humanity.

He felt the same physical agony that the two thieves did. His emotions felt the sting of the mockery. He felt the disappointment of His disciples' fearful defection. His soul agonized for the coming judgment that He predicted for Jerusalem. As a man, Jesus entrusted His soul to God at the point of death, just as He had trusted the Father throughout His earthly life.

And yet the fact that the creation groaned with the power of the sun being darkened shows us that this was no mere man who hung on that cross. He could predict accurately the horrible destruction of Jerusalem. His death fulfilled David's prophecy in Psalm 22:18, of the soldiers casting lots and dividing His garments among them. He was the Christ of God, God's Chosen One, the promised King of the Jews. As God, He could promise salvation to the penitent thief on the cross, granting him forgiveness and the assurance that he would be with Him that very day in Paradise. As God in human flesh, He was truly innocent of all wrong. He is, in Paul's words, "our great God and Savior" (Titus 2:13). Anyone who denies either the full humanity or the full deity of the Lord Jesus Christ has denied the very essence of the Christian faith.

- Jesus is innocent and righteous, yet He bore our sins.

Throughout the story of Christ's trials and crucifixion, Luke repeatedly affirms His innocence. Three times Pilate proclaims it (23:4, 14-15, 22). The thief on the cross repeats it (23:41). The centurion reaffirms it (23:47). Jesus Christ is the righteous one, our Advocate with the Father, who is the propitiation for our sins (1 John 2:1-2). I think that Calvin (p. 327) is right here in saying that this Roman centurion was probably not converted so as to utter this testimony of Christ, but rather "was only for a moment the herald of Christ's divinity."

Christ could not have been the Savior of others if He had sins of His own. If He had blemishes on His character, He would not have been an acceptable lamb for the sacrifice for the sins of others. But by His offering of Himself, Jesus abolished that old sacrificial system, symbolized by the tearing of the veil in the temple (23:45). Those sacrifices could not permanently cleanse the worshipers (Heb. 10:1-4), but Jesus, by the one offering of Himself, once for all paid the price of our sins (Heb. 10:11-14)! This is why, by the way, the Roman Catholic celebration of the Mass is such an

affront to God. They claim that the wafer actually becomes the body of Christ and that weekly they are sacrificing Him again and again, and that the worshipers must continually take His sacrifice in order to be progressively cleansed. But Scripture plainly proclaims that rather than suffering repeatedly, "now once at the consummation He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (Heb. 9:26).

- Jesus was rich, yet He became poor that we might be rich in Him.

When the soldiers gambled for the very last possession that Christ had on this earth, His clothing, He was literally stripped of everything. Calvin observes (p. 298,

> For the Evangelists exhibit to us the Son of God stripped of his garments, in order to inform us, that by this nakedness we have obtained those riches which make us honorable in the presence of God. God determined that his own Son should be stripped of his raiment, that we, clothed with his righteousness and with abundance of all good things, may appear with boldness in company with the angels, whereas formerly our loathsome and disgraceful aspect, in tattered garments, kept us back from approaching to heaven.

Or, as Paul put it, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).

- Jesus is full of mercy, love and forgiveness, yet He is the Judge of all.

I've already touched on this, so I will only mention it in passing. You see the Lord's compassion in speaking to the women lamenting along the way to the cross. His thoughts were not on His own suffering, but on what they and their children would suffer. You see His compassion and mercy in His prayer for His persecutors, as well as with the thief on the cross. Yet, His mercy and love do not negate the sober fact of judgment. He was crucified in our place because God does not brush over sin. All sin will be judged. Either you trust in Jesus as the one who bore your judgment, or you will face it yourself.

- Jesus is the crucified one with no followers, yet He is King of all.

Jesus was basically alone on the cross. John's gospel records how that apostle, along with Mary, the mother of Jesus, were there at the cross. But the rest stood off at a distance. The sign over the cross, stating the criminal's offense, read, "This is the King of the Jews." It was Pilate's dig at the Jewish leaders. They had forced him into crucifying Jesus, so he got back at them by saying, "Here is your Jewish King!"

But Luke wants us to see that Jesus is truly not only the King of the Jews, but of all the nations. Though He was crucified in shame, He is risen and coming again to reign in power and majesty. Luke wants each of us to ask, "Is the crucified Jesus *my* King?"

Conclusion

John Gordon was a respected general for the South in the Civil War. After the war, he was running for the U.S. Senate, but a man who had served under him in the war, angry over some political incident, was determined to see him defeated. During the convention, he angrily stamped down the aisle with his anti-Gordon vote in hand. As he saw Gordon sitting on the platform, he noticed how his once handsome face was disfigured with the scars of battle. Overcome with emotion, he exclaimed, "It's no use; I can't do it. Here's my vote for John Gordon." Then, turning to the general, he said, "Forgive me, General. I had forgotten the scars."

If your love for the Lord has grown cold, go back to the cross and remember the scars—not just the physical scars, but the scars of God's wrath that Jesus bore in your place. Let His amazing love turn your heart from sin and give you more devotion to serve Him.

Discussion Questions

1. The Puritans often talked about the exceeding sinfulness of sin. How would it help us to see this more in our day?
2. The idea of God's wrath toward sin is not popular now. How can we properly emphasize it without people shrugging us off?
3. Discuss: We cannot properly understand God's love until we have understood His wrath against sin.

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