

Sermon outline and notes:

© Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor

Swift Creek Baptist Church.com, 18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834

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Luke 23:26-34a “The Via Dolorosa”

Intro. This morning we are going to follow Jesus as He is led from the praetorian, the place of judgment, to the hill of Calvary to be crucified. Luke is the gospel that gives us the most information regarding what is known as the Via Dolorosa, meaning “painful path” or “way of suffering.” Scholars disagree on the exact path Christ took. Scripture only gives the beginning and end of that journey. The rest is based on tradition.

If you were to visit Jerusalem, one of the tours you could take is the Via Dolorosa. They will take you through 14 stations of the cross as they are called, eight refer to biblical events and the others are just based on tradition. This morning I want us to follow especially Luke’s account of the journey Jesus took from the place where He was condemned to die to the place where He did die for our sins. This journey only added to the suffering that He endured for you and for me.

You see the Romans used all aspects of the crucifixion as a strong deterrent to those who would break Roman law or cause trouble. Once a person was condemned to death by crucifixion, they would have to bear their own cross (cf. John 19:17), probably just the cross beam, through the crowded streets of the city. This was part of the condemned prisoner’s humiliation. One soldier would lead the way holding a sign stating the charge the person was convicted of (Barclay). Note in v.26 that “they led Him away,” implying that at least one or two soldiers led the way, no doubt followed by other soldiers who would force condemned men to proceed forward. They would deliberately force the person to go a longer, less direct route to the place of crucifixion so they would be seen by many people. Public executions drew crowds of spectators. Most criminals would face the jeers and insults of the people as they passed by the crowded streets of the city. The streets were especially crowded for the path that Jesus walked since it was Passover, and because He was such a well-known public figure. Furthermore, word had spread regarding what it happened to Jesus and many of His followers had come to see Him and offer sympathy. Then the place of crucifixion would be just outside the city¹ near one of the busy crossroads entering into the city, again to expose them to many who would see them as they passed by.

This morning we are going to witness the suffering of Jesus for us and especially witness the loving concern He had of others even at a time when anyone of us would have been more focused on our own suffering. We will also see His love and grace manifested so clearly from our text today. May sinners be drawn to Him as I preach this message today. I pray that this message will also prepare us for this holy week we are entering.

As the scene unfolds, the first truth I want us to see is this:

I. JESUS SUFFERED SO MUCH, HE COULD NOT CARRY HIS CROSS

That is what I see from the gospel accounts of the Via Dolorosa. So note with me:

A. The Evidence of His Great Suffering - Only the apostle John adds the detail which he must have noticed was missing from the gospel accounts. In John 19:17 he said that Jesus, “bearing

¹ This was consistent with Jewish law, and would certainly have been practiced in Judea (Leviticus 24:14; Numbers 15:35-36; 19:3; cf. Hebrews 13:12-13).

His cross, went out to a place called the Place of a Skull....” So it is clear from John’s account that Jesus began His journey to Calvary bearing His own cross. In fact, Jesus alluded to this custom when He spoke about the fact that those who follow Him must take up their cross (Mt. 10:38; 16:24; Mark 8:34; 10:21; Luke 9:23). But evidently somewhere along the way Jesus fell beneath the weight of the cross for He was so weak and so physically and emotionally exhausted, He could carry it no longer.

Consider why even Jesus, strong and healthy as He was, reached the point that He could no longer carry His cross. After all, He agonized so much in Gethsemane that his sweat was a great drops of blood. He was emotionally drained from the betrayal by Judas and the denial by Peter. He endured an unjust nighttime trial before the Sanhedrin, which included abuse by the temple guard. He endured such a severe flogging by the Romans that His flesh had been torn by a whip that contained bits of metal in the end of the lash. Then consider the beating He received at the hands of the Romans, when the crown of thorns was also placed on His head. No wonder Jesus needed someone to carry His cross!

Oh how we should respond with gratitude Jesus was willing to suffer so much for us! We can only imagine how much Jesus suffered even before He was crucified.

B. Simon of Cyrene Bore His Cross for Him – V.26 says, “Now as they led Him away, they laid hold of a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, who was coming from the country, and on him they laid the cross that he might bear it after² Jesus.” Roman soldiers had the authority to compel people into temporary service (Mt. 5:41). The sign of such impressment was a tap on the shoulder with the flat of the blade of a Roman spear or sword. Simon had come all the way from Cyrene in North Africa to attend the Passover feast. Many Jews lived in Cyrene (Acts 2:10; 6:9; 11:20; 13:1). Since he was from North Africa, he probably had a dark complexion. Evidently, he spent the night in the countryside³ around Jerusalem, and perhaps was coming for the 9:00 o’clock prayer meeting in the temple.

Try to imagine the feelings of Simon that day. At first, he may have been bitter at being forced into such a gruesome assignment, of carrying the heavy, bloody crossbeam. Yet his encounter with Jesus changed all of that. I say that because we have good reason to believe that Simon was converted because of this encounter with Jesus. In his Gospel Mark identified Simon as “the father of Alexander and Rufus” (Mark 15:21). It is believed that he was writing his gospel to Christians in Rome, and they clearly knew these sons of Simon of Cyrene. The apostle Paul referred to a Christian in Rome named Rufus in Romans 16:13.

This was likely the first time he ever met Jesus. I can imagine that Jesus thanked him for carrying His cross. Surely, Simon must have stayed to witness the crucifixion, to hear all the loving words of Jesus, and to witness the miraculous events that took place at His crucifixion. He came to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, but instead got to witness the sacrifice of the true Lamb of God (John 1:29). He could have heard the centurion say, “Truly this was the Son of God” (Mt. 27:54). Simon was the first person to literally take up the cross and follow Jesus. Evidently, it wasn’t long before he did that spiritually.

Have you heeded the call of Jesus to take up your cross and follow Him?

² Luke alone reports that Simon followed Jesus as he carried his cross.

³ Note he “was coming from the country”, *agros*, most often translated “field.” This further emphasized he was not a citizen of Jerusalem.

II. JESUS WAS CONCERNED FOR THE WOMEN OF JERUSALEM

Now as Jesus passed through the streets of Jerusalem Luke tells us in v.27, “And a great multitude of the people followed Him, and women who also mourned and lamented Him.” You get the impression from the crowd that stood before Pontius Pilate that many of the people had turned against Jesus. But here we see that many were grieved at what had happened to Jesus. In fact, Luke calls them “a multitude.” They did not agree with what their leaders and the mob had done. This was especially true of the women in Jerusalem. That group may have included members of a Jerusalem Society of Charitable Women. As they noticed his bruised and bloodied body, His utterly exhausted appearance, and injustice of what was happening, notice how they were responding to the scene unfolding before them. The words translated, “mourned and lamented,” were used of the public expressions of grief that were common at funerals, such as beatings one’s breasts, loud wails of grief, and even cutting oneself. Many women were crying and wailing with tears of grief at what they were witnessing. Their hearts were going out to Him with genuine sympathy. As far as the gospel records are concerned, no woman was ever an enemy of Jesus. Have you ever thought about that? So this “great multitude of people” was not primarily made up of curiosity seekers, but people who were genuinely sympathetic to the present and impending suffering of Jesus.

At such a time as this, we would expect that Jesus, fully human as He was, would be absorbed by His own suffering. And yet notice from our text that:

A. He Expressed His Concern *for Them* - He says in v.28, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me....” If there was ever a moment in His life when He might’ve been preoccupied with His own suffering, it was now. Yet He knew that His suffering would only be for a few more hours. He knew that His suffering would be followed by a glorious resurrection and ascension to the throne of God. He knew the truth that was later expressed in Hebrews 12:2, “who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame....” No in that moment He was not concerned for Himself, but for the women behind Him, some of whom would later face weeping and wailing that would be far greater. He knew that women and children would suffer more in a time of war and famine. 40 years later, during the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans, hungry men who were defending their city took food from their suffering wives and children and even killed and ate their own flesh and blood! The famine was so severe that even some women ate their own children. Jesus knew that the Romans would destroy the inhabitants of Jerusalem without showing any regard for sex or age. No wonder Jesus said, “do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.”

The entire address of Jesus to “the daughters of Jerusalem” is an unforgettable manifestation of the Savior’s complete lack of self-pity and of His ardent desire, even now, that the impenitent may repent and be saved.

So as we see clear evidence of the concern of Jesus for others, I am reminded of 1 Peter 5:7, “casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.” We are living in a time when many people are anxious. They are concerned about the virus that could kill them. They are concerned about losing their job or their family being plunged into a great economic depression if this economic shutdown last much longer. We may be facing a time of judgment from God for national and worldwide rebellion against God. I want every child of God to know that God would rather save than judge. God cares for you, and when your heart is anxious, call upon his name in prayer and He will help you.

Another evidence of Jesus concern was the fact that:

B. He Warned of Great Judgment to Come – Jesus said in vv.29-31, “For indeed the days are coming in which they will say, ‘Blessed *are* the barren, wombs that never bore, and breasts which 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 in the green wood, what will be done in the dry?” Jesus gives three statements that emphasize the severity of the judgment that would come upon Jerusalem. Let’s look at each of those statements:

1. The Childless Would Be Considered Blessed (v.29) – childlessness was considered a shame and a disgrace in Israel (cf. Luke 1:25; Genesis 30:23; Isaiah 4:1).

2. Suffering Would Be So Great They Would Seek Death (v.30) – Jesus was referencing prophecy here. In Hos. 10:8 we read that the divine judgment would be so appalling against Samaria that in deathly agony people would yearn to be covered by mountains and hills to put them out of their misery, yet their plea would be in vain (cf. also Isa. 2:19). The final cry of anguish will be the most hopeless of all. It will be uttered as people realize they are facing the great day of judgment. Revelation 6:16-17 says that they will say “to the mountains and rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?’”

3. Jerusalem Would Become Especially Ripe for Judgment (v.31) - Many interpreters believe that Jesus was referring to a popular proverb.⁴ Wood that is freshly cut and green does not burn easily. The green wood refers either to Israel at the time of Jesus, when it should have been fruitful, or to Jesus Himself, who was bearing great and unjust judgment. The meaning of dry wood is unmistakable. Dry wood burns easily. Jesus is predicting that a day will come when Israel will face the fire of judgment and will have little resistance against the fire. Indeed, their city and even their temple was burned to the ground. What they did to Jesus was pure evil and deserved great judgment. Another way to paraphrase what Jesus said is this, “If the Roman authorities do this to One who is innocent, what will they do to you who are guilty.”

Jesus warned of the judgment to come so that the women of Jerusalem could avoid it. What Jesus predicted came to pass in just 40 years. So as soon as reports of the approach of the Roman army reach their ears, they could have heeded the words of Jesus and left Jerusalem to live elsewhere, just as He advised His disciples in the Olivet discourse just a few days before (Mt. 24:16; Mark 13:14; Luke 21:21). Many would like to believe in a God who would simply prevent such suffering. Yet the God of the Bible is holy, righteous and just. He must punish sin and rebellion or He would no longer be righteous and just. Yet God always provides a way to be saved from His wrath. Dear friend, heed the words of John the Baptist in Mt. 3:7 and “flee from the wrath to come.” The destruction of Jerusalem that followed was just a foretaste of both the judgment of the great tribulation and the everlasting judgment to come. Run to Jesus who bore the wrath of God in your place. He bore for you the suffering and death that results from sin. The choice is very clear in Scripture. Either turn to Jesus in repentance of sin and trust in Him or you will endure the wrath of God. That is the solemn truth of the Word of God no matter what man says. In Luke 9:23 Jesus said, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” Then He said in v.25, “For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost?” Give heed to the loving warnings of Jesus before it’s too late.

Furthermore, in this journey to the cross, we see from our text that:

⁴ however, there could be a reference here to Ezek. 20:47, “Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Behold, I will kindle a fire in you, and it shall devour every green tree and every dry tree in you; the blazing flame shall not be quenched, and all faces from the south to the north shall be scorched by it.’”

III. JESUS WAS ACCOMPANIED BY CRIMINALS

V.32 says, “There were also two others, criminals, led with Him to be put to death.” “Others” here in Greek means “others of a different kind.” Jesus was *not* a criminal like those men. It had been prophesied that the suffering servant would be “numbered with the transgressors” (22:37; Isaiah 53:12). According to other gospel accounts, these men used violence to rob people (Mt. 27:38; Mark 15:27) and they may have even committed murder in the process, since they were sentenced to death by crucifixion.⁵

Then we read in v.33, “And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left.” It was a gross injustice that Jesus was crucified between two criminals, as if He too were a criminal. Yet it was only fitting that Jesus was providentially placed in the midst (cf. 24:36; Rev. 1:13; 7:17). Furthermore, in one sense it was fitting that Jesus was associated with sinners even in His death. Is it not true that Jesus came to earth in order to seek and save the lost (19:10)? Was He not “the friend of tax collectors and sinners!” (Matthew 11:19)? Indeed, one of those thieves was saved that very day according to v.43.

Jesus is still saving sinners today. No matter what you have done, no matter how deeply into sin you have gone, Jesus can save you. Surely your sin is not greater than the suffering that He endured! He paid for your sin in full that Calvary.

Though I jumped ahead due to the topic, our journey to the hill of crucifixion is complete. We read in v.33, “when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him....” The word “Calvary” is from the Latin word for skull. Actually, the Greek word so translated was *kranion*, from which we get our English word cranium. The site may have resembled the skull, as does “Gordon’s Calvary” near the Damascus gate in Jerusalem. Or perhaps the name simply grew out of the ugly facts of execution. Perhaps skulls of crucified victims could be seen on that hill.

The gospel writers speak with amazing brevity regarding the crucifixion itself. In Luke’s account it is spoken with just three words. There was no need to go into detail for the readers of the gospel accounts in the first century. They were very familiar with the horror of crucifixion. Large nails were driven through his hands and feet (John 20:25; cf. Luke 24:40). The pain of those large nails being driven through bones and ligaments must’ve been excruciating. It was a slow, painful death associated with hunger, thirst, sunburn, and difficulty breathing. What great love Jesus must have had for us.

But we also see His great love expressed in the final brief scene that I will share with you this morning.

IV. JESUS SHOWED GRACE EVEN IN HIS SUFFERING

According to all four gospel accounts Jesus spoke seven times from the cross. Only Luke reports the first statement of Jesus, which we read in v.34, “Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.’” Thus He fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 53:12, He “made intercession for the transgressors.” Jesus did not say, “Father, forgive them...” only once, but several times, due to the fact that “said” is in the imperfect tense. It is commonly believed that He uttered this most gracious prayer as the soldiers were driving the nails into His hands and feet, a total of three times. Surely, this is a reflection of the heart of God. There has never been such a

⁵ Could not find explicit evidence of this though Barabbas was certainly charged with murder.

manifestation a forgiving grace. The Roman soldiers certainly did not realize what they were doing. They were just carrying out orders, supposing that Jesus was just another insurrectionist among the Jews. Jesus may have included those in the crowd who called for His crucifixion. He knew they were just blindly following their leaders (cf. Acts 3:17). And so especially upon such as these, Jesus prayed that God would forgive them for the horrible thing they were doing. Indeed, many of the same people did not face any immediate judgment for what they had done due to the intercession of Jesus. As for the people, the fall of Jerusalem was delayed 40 years.

Jesus practiced what He preached in Luke 6:27, “But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you.” He also insisted that His followers forgive others, even 70×7 if necessary (Mt. 18:22). Should He not exemplify such forgiveness Himself?

Jesus did indeed set an example for others. When Stephen was being stoned and was near death, he prayed, “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.” No wonder other martyrs of the Christian faith have been able to forgive their murderers and intercede for their salvation.

If God has forgiven you, shouldn't you be like Jesus and forgive others? Is there anyone that you are still bitter toward and you haven't forgiven them? Consider Jesus and show forgiving grace to others just as Jesus did. Do it today!

Conclusion: As we have traveled with Jesus on the Via Dolorosa, we have witnessed evidence of His great suffering for you and for me. We have witness evidence of His concern for others in spite of His own suffering. We have heard His warnings to flee the judgment of God that is coming. Jesus died for sinners like you and I so that we too could be forgiven. Will you turn to Him in repentance and faith and be saved while there is still opportunity?

Many in my audience have already been saved by Jesus. May we respond with gratitude to Jesus. They we deny self and take up our cross to follow Jesus daily. And if that means suffering and making sacrifices for others, then let us gladly follow the example of Jesus. And finally, let us follow His example and forgive others. May the Lord bless you as you heed His word and follow His example.

Sources: William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2020; Virtus E. Gideon, *Luke: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978); H. A. Ironside, *Addresses on the Gospel of Luke* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1947); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:23] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2012); H. D. M. Spence & Joseph S. Exell, ed., *The Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. 16 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977); Robert H. Stein, *The New American Commentary: Luke* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992); Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Courageous: Luke 14-24* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).