

To Seek and to Save the Lost

The Death of Jesus

Luke 23:44-49

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Scripture

In our study of the life and ministry of Jesus, we come today to examine his death.

During his final week in Jerusalem, Jesus was hailed by the people as their conquering Messiah, and then rejected by them as they cried for his death by crucifixion. After a series of rushed civil and religious trials, Jesus was finally sentenced to death by crucifixion.

Let's read about the death of Jesus in Luke 23:44-49:

⁴⁴ It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, ⁴⁵ while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶ Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last. ⁴⁷ Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent!" ⁴⁸ And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. ⁴⁹ And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things. (Luke 23:44-49)

Introduction

It would be helpful for us to understand what happens to a person when he is crucified. Pastor John MacArthur says in his commentary on Luke:

Through the years there has been a lot of study done on the physical aspects of crucifixion. Perhaps the most concise and helpful treatment appeared in the March 21, 1986, issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (vol. 255, no. 11) in an article entitled,

“On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ” (William D. Edwards, MD; Wesley J. Gabel, MDiv; Floyd E. Hosmer, MS, AMI). According to that study everyone who was crucified was first beaten. The victim’s arms were lifted up and tied to a pole, leaving him in a slumped position. Braided leather thongs with bits of metal and bone embedded in them were used to lash the victim from the bottom of the neck down to the back of the knees. Two lictors (attendants of Roman magistrates) hit him with alternating blows. There are no indications as to how many lashes the victims customarily received; that was at the discretion of the lictors. The bone and the metal would rip into the flesh, causing deep contusions and lacerations into the subcutaneous tissues, and then into the fabric of the muscles. The resulting pain and blood loss would lead to circulatory shock.

All three men crucified that day were scourged. But the soldiers, in their mockery of Jesus, put a robe on Him made of wool that would have irritated His open wounds. They also placed a crown of thorns on His head, beat Him in the head with a stick, and spat on Him. At some point, they tore the robe off Him, which would have ripped open the wounds. Further, the hematidrosis (bloody sweat) He experienced (Luke 22:44) made His skin hypersensitive. The Lord also suffered from lack of sleep, lack of food, and lack of water.

Crucifixion was a slow death, intended to inflict maximum agony and suffering. The victims carried their crosses, or at least the crosspiece, across the back of their necks and shoulders with their arms tied to it. Jesus received help from Simon of Cyrene in carrying His cross, either because in His weakened condition He could no longer carry it, or perhaps because He was not moving fast enough to suit the soldiers.

Arriving at the place of crucifixion, the prisoners would be offered sedation (which Jesus refused; Matt. 27:34) and then be thrown to the ground on their backs. The crosspiece would then be pulled under their shoulders and their arms nailed to it using tapered iron spikes five to seven inches long, and about a half inch square. They were driven through the wrists rather than the palms of the hands so they could carry the full weight of the slumping body.

The impaled victim was then lifted up, and the crosspiece was attached to the upright post, often called the stipes. The feet were then nailed with one nail, the knees bent up so that the victims could push up on the wounds in their feet as well as pull up on the wounds in their

wrists in order to breathe. The sagging position of the body with the knees bent made it impossible to breathe steadily; the soldiers could cause death in minutes by breaking the victims' legs (cf. John 19:31–32). Needless to say, no one survived crucifixion.

The agonizing pain those crucified endured is almost incomprehensible. The most extreme word in English language to describe pain is the word “excruciating,” which comes from the Latin word *excruciat*, meaning “out of the cross.” In order to breathe, a person had to pull and push himself up, causing the wounds on his back from the scourging to rub painfully on the rough wood of the cross. The nails in the wrists would crush or sever the long sensory radial motor median nerve, causing relentless bolts of pain. The nails in the feet would likely pierce the deep perineal and plantar nerves, causing the same results.

The weight of the body on the nail wounds as the victim struggled to push and pull himself upright to catch a breath caused pain so intense that he could not survive long. “It is likely that this form of respiration would not suffice and that hypercarbia [the presence of an abnormally high level of carbon dioxide in the blood] would soon result. The onset of muscle cramps or tetanic contractions, due to fatigue and hypercarbia, would hinder respiration even further” (“On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ,” 1461).

When death finally, mercifully came hours or days later, the Roman soldiers confirmed it by piercing the victim's chest with a spear. The resulting flow of blood and water (serous pleural and pericardial fluid; John 19:34) would indicate death.¹

Rabbi Epstein said that “when one is led out to execution, he is given a goblet of wine containing a grain of frankincense, in order to numb his senses.”² However, Mark 15:23 says that when Jesus arrived at The Skull “they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.” The reason Jesus did not take the wine was so that he would be fully conscious of the suffering he was about to experience.

¹ MacArthur, John F (2014-10-01). Luke 18-24 MacArthur New Testament Commentary (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series) (pp. 378-380). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

² Rabbi Dr. I. Epstein, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud Seder Nezikin*, Vol. 3 (London: Soncino, 1935), 279.

Lesson

The death of Jesus in Luke 23:44-49 shows us a number of events preceding and following his death.

Let's use the following outline:

1. Events Preceding Jesus' Death (23:44-46)
2. Events Following Jesus' Death (23:47-49)

I. Events Preceding Jesus' Death (23:44-46)

First, let's look at events preceding Jesus' death.

There were three events preceding the death of Jesus that I want to examine.

A. *Darkness Over the Whole Land (23:44-45a)*

First, there was darkness over the whole land.

Luke said in verses 44-45a, **"It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed."** The **sixth hour** was noon; so **there was darkness over the whole land** from noon until 3 p.m. The darkness was most likely just **over the whole land** of Israel. It was not an eclipse, because an eclipse lasts only a few minutes, and this darkness lasted for three hours. The Bible never states the cause of the darkness, but it was clearly some supernatural sign. So, what did it mean?

In the Bible, darkness was identified as a sign of mourning. The Old Testament prophet Amos prophesied that darkness would accompany the Day of the Lord. God said in Amos 8:9-10, "And on that day. . . I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. . . . I will make it like the mourning for an only son. . . ." These words of Amos came true that Friday when Jesus was crucified and died. Darkness came over the whole land, and James Montgomery Boice said that it was as if "a veil had been drawn over the

unspeakable suffering of God's Son."³

Darkness was also a sign of evil. Jesus actually said this the previous night when he was arrested. He said to the chief priests and officers of the temple and elders, who had come out against him, ". . . But this is your hour, and the power of darkness" (Luke 22:53). Evil flourishes in darkness. Jesus was betrayed and arrested at night, and now as he hung on the cross, darkness came over the whole land to signify the evil of crucifying the completely innocent Son of God.

Finally, darkness was a sign of divine judgment. In those three hours that Jesus was hanging on the cross, he was suffering the wrath of God for our sin. The completely sinless Son of God was experiencing the divine judgment that should have fallen on us. The prophet Zephaniah said that God's divine judgment upon sin would be a day of darkness. He said in Zephaniah 1:15, "A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness."

The darkness over the whole land was a sign of God's divine judgment upon sin. As Philip Ryken said, "The dark sky showed that he was suffering the hellish curse of God's wrath against human sin. There was a disturbance in creation itself in order to demonstrate what Jesus was doing on the cross: suffering God's judgment against our sin."⁴ The apostle Peter put it this way in 1 Peter 2:24, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed." And the apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Jesus was fully conscious on the cross as he experienced God's wrath that each one of us rightly deserves. But because of his great love for his Father and for his own, he bore our penalty. As Kent Hughes said, "There in the darkness our sins were imputed to Christ,

³ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 2:623.

⁴ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Dorani, vol. 2, *Reformed Expository Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 609.

and his righteousness has now been imputed to us who believe.”⁵

That is the good news of the Gospel! Jesus paid the penalty for our sin. He bore the wrath of God in our place. Do you believe that?

B. The Curtain of the Temple Was Torn in Two (23:45b)

Second, the curtain of the temple was torn in two.

Luke said in verse 45b, “**And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.**” Matthew’s Gospel indicates that this took place at the moment Jesus died (cf. Matthew 27:51).

The curtain of the temple was made of “fine Babylonian cloth of blue, scarlet, and purple.”⁶ It was about an inch thick and it separated the the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, also known as the Holy of Holies. The priests performed the daily functions in the Holy Place, but only the High Priest went into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement to make atonement for his own sin and the sins of the people. The Ark of the Covenant was in the Holy of Holies, and that is where the presence of God was said to dwell.

So, why was the curtain of the temple torn in two. What did that mean? And why did it happen as Jesus died?

The temple curtain being torn in two was a sign of spiritual access to God through Jesus Christ. Access to God was never direct; it was always mediated. In the Old Testament it was mediated through the blood of unblemished animals. However, all of the countless numbers of animals that were sacrificed in the Old Testament all pointed to the final, once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (cf. John 1:29). And so when the curtain of the temple was torn in two it was a sign that the old covenant had ended, and that the new covenant had begun. The sacrificial system of the Old Testament had come to an end, and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ

⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 391.

⁶ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 1860.

on the cross was now efficacious to save sinners all over the world. Jesus' sacrifice for sin now saves sinners who repent of their sin and believe him to bear the penalty for their sin. Hebrews 10:19-22 says:

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

The tearing of the curtain in the temple teaches us that sinners no longer have to go to Jerusalem to offer a sacrifice for their sins. Now, access to God is available to all through faith in Jesus Christ.

This is good news! Every person who puts his or her trust in Jesus Christ has “this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf” (Hebrews 6:19-20). Because of Jesus' death on the cross, we now have access to God through Jesus. And the tearing of the curtain of the temple is a sign of that access.

C. Jesus' Final Words from the Cross (23:46)

And third, notice Jesus' final words from the cross.

While Jesus was hanging on the cross, he uttered seven short statements. We have examined these short sayings at seven Good Friday services in previous years. Only Luke records Jesus' final words from cross. **Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last (23:46).**

Apparently, many devoted Jews prayed Psalm 31:5 before they went to sleep at night: “Into your hand I commit my spirit.” It was their version of the prayer many people pray today, “Now I lay me down to sleep, / I pray the Lord my soul to keep; / If I should die before I wake / I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

But what was so different about Jesus' prayer on the cross is the addition of one word, the word **"Father."** Jesus prayed, **"Father [Abba], into your hands I commit my spirit!"** As Kent Hughes said, "It is a matter of Biblical and scholarly record that no one prayed this way until Jesus did so. The ascription of 'Father' was revolutionary!"⁷ Jesus is the Son of God, and he was affirming his identity as the Father's Son. He often used the word **"Father"** in his ministry. He had an intimate and personal relationship with his heavenly Father.

What does Jesus' prayer mean for us? Philip Ryken applies it in the following way for us:

Jesus used this prayer almost word for word, except that he made it more personal by calling God "Father." This is an example for our own intercession. There are times in life when we feel God-forsaken, when we wonder whether God is even there. Jesus knows what this is like because he really *was* forsaken. Nevertheless, he trusted his Father in the darkness, as we should trust him whenever we are feeling desperate. Even when we cannot see the light and prayer seems like nothing more than a cry in the dark, we are called to trust the Father, as Jesus did. By faith we yield everything up to God, surrendering everything we are and have to him for all eternity.⁸

II. Events Following Jesus' Death (23:47-49)

And second, let's notice several events following Jesus' death. There are just three brief events I want us to notice.

A. *The Conversion of the Centurion (23:47)*

First, notice the conversion of the centurion.

The centurion had supervised the scourging of Jesus, and his crucifixion. He heard Jesus forgive those who crucified him. He heard Jesus promise Paradise to one of the thieves who was crucified with

⁷ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, 392.

⁸ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, 617.

him. He had experienced the cosmic sign of the unusual darkness. He heard Jesus' triumphant cry from the cross as he committed his spirit into the hands of his heavenly Father. **Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent!"** (23:47).

We don't know what happened to the **centurion**, but he came to see that Jesus was indeed the Son of God and Savior of sinners. And so he praised God and affirmed Jesus' innocence.

The centurion's conversion teaches us that Jesus saves Gentiles as well as Jews. All people are saved by Jesus. There is no one who is beyond Jesus' salvation.

B. The Action of the Crowds (23:48)

Second, notice the action of the crowds.

Luke said in verse 48, "**And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts.**" Apparently, they also saw that Jesus was innocent. And they were so disturbed by what had happened to an innocent man that they **returned home beating their breasts**. Perhaps, however, that indication of remorse was, as Kent Hughes said, "a sure prelude to grace for some of them, as so beautifully happened. . . at Pentecost (Acts 2)."⁹

C. The Observation of Jesus' Followers (23:49)

And third, notice the observation of Jesus' followers.

Luke said in verse 49, "**And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things.**" In just three days God would raise the Lord Jesus Christ back to life again. The despair that they now felt would soon be replaced with victorious joy as they proclaimed the news of

⁹ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, 395.

Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the death of Jesus in Luke 23:44-49, we should make sure that we have been reconciled to God through Jesus.

Kent Hughes notes that a small boy was turning the pages of a book of religious art. When he came to a picture of the crucifixion he looked at it for a long time, and a sad look came to his face.

Finally, he said, "If God had been there, he wouldn't have let them do it."

The little boy did not understand that God was there. He did not understand why Jesus died. He did not understand what the crucifixion really meant.

Jesus died, "the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" (1 Peter 3:18).

And so I conclude with Paul's words to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 5:18-21:

¹⁸All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Have you been reconciled to God? "We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

And if you have been reconciled to God through Jesus, will you tell others about Jesus?

For this is why Jesus died. Amen.¹⁰

¹⁰ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, 395.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

O God, our Father and Jesus' Father, thank you for the death of your Son Jesus Christ. We know that Jesus did not die for his own sin, for he had none. Instead, he died to pay the penalty for our sin. For our sake you made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

O God, will you grant repentance and faith to all who hear this message. May we trust in Jesus alone for the gift of salvation. And may we who know Jesus as our Savior proclaim the good news of salvation to those who don't know Jesus savingly.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!