

This morning, I am in the thirty-first week of a sermon series that I've entitled "Meeting Jesus." I am making my way through Luke's account of the life of Jesus, looking at various interactions that people had with Jesus, in order to better understand what it means to know and follow Him. At this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus has just been betrayed by Judas and arrested by the religious leaders. He has been convicted of blasphemy by the religious authorities and sentenced to death by the political authorities, even though they do not find just cause for his execution, but so as to not cause a riot by the crowd clamoring for Jesus' death. This morning, we will be looking at Jesus as he heads towards his death.

Luke 23:26–43 - As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus.²⁷ A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him.²⁸ Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for **yourselves and for your children**."²⁹ For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!'³⁰ Then "'they will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!'"³¹ For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"³² Two other men, both criminals, were also led out **with him to be executed**.³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left.³⁴ Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.³⁵ The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One."³⁶ The soldiers also **came up and mocked him**. They offered him wine vinegar³⁷ and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."³⁸ There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the jews.³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence?"⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our **deeds deserve**. But this man has done nothing wrong."⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."⁴³ Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Before we look at this passage, I want to reflect upon a verse from Ecclesiastes: **Ecclesiastes 7:2** - It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart.

It is good for us to look at the death of Jesus and to take this to heart, so that we might understand how to face death ourselves. So let us pray that God would make the meaning of Jesus' death clear to us this morning.

The passage begins with a convoy to the cross. The Romans made the people who were going to be crucified carry their own crossbeam to Golgotha, the place of the skull, where the crossbeam would be tied to the vertical stake, they would be nailed to the cross, and they would be lifted up to slowly die by asphyxiation. But remember, Jesus has been whipped and beaten within an inch of his life, and he is so weakened by the torture that he can not carry the cross beam to Golgotha. And so, the soldiers take a man known as Simon of Cyrene and make him carry the cross for Jesus. In Mark's gospel, we read this:

Mark 15:21 - A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.

“The father of Alexander and Rufus” is one of those comments that helps to bolster the authenticity and early dating of the gospel stories; it was inserted because Mark's readers would have been familiar with Alexander and Rufus. And indeed, Rufus shows up in Romans:

Romans 16:13 - Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too.

So Simon of Cyrene carries the cross for Jesus. And in the next few interactions, we are going to see Jesus say three profoundly shocking things that help us understand the meaning of this torturous death:

1) “Do not weep for me; weep for yourselves”

As Jesus heads towards the cross, a large number of people are following, including women who are mourning and wailing for him. And in response to their cries, Jesus says a shocking and unexpected thing:

Luke 23:28-31 - Jesus turned and said to them, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For the time will come when you will say, ‘Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ ³⁰ Then “they will say to the mountains, “Fall

on us!” and to the hills, “Cover us!”” ³¹ For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

What is going on here? The women who follow Jesus to the cross are in tears at the sight of this innocent man, this good man, dying an unjust death. But Jesus does not thank them for their tears, does not weep alongside them, but tells them **not to cry for him, but to weep for themselves and for their children**. And in his ensuing words, he essentially tells them that judgment is coming on Israel, and it is going to be so terrible that people will wish they didn’t have children, so that they would not have to see their children suffer and die. They will cry out for annihilation, for the mountains to destroy them and to put an end to their suffering. Because, as Jesus says, if the Romans would do this to an innocent person, then what will happen with the rest of them? And sure enough, in 70 AD, Rome would destroy Jerusalem in terrible fashion.

Jesus’ uses language that is common in passages about judgment and destruction:

Hosea 10:8 - The high places of wickedness will be destroyed— it is the sin of Israel. Thorns and thistles will grow up and cover their altars. Then they will say to the mountains, “Cover us!” and to the hills, “Fall on us!”

As we read in **Revelation 6:15-17** - Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. ¹⁶ They called to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! ¹⁷ For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?”

Jesus tells them to weep for themselves because of the coming judgment. They need not weep for Him, because He is going to His death willingly, in order to die for the sins of the world and make a way for them to be restored to a right relationship with God. His death is not an accident, but is the greatest display of sacrificial love this world will ever know. **But the reason He is dying is because of their sins. The reason that judgment is coming is because of their sins.** And so, instead of weeping for him because of his unjust death, they should mourn for their own condition. As Jesus said in the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 5:3-4 - “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

Blessed are those who know they are spiritually bankrupt and have nothing to offer God, and blessed are those whose spiritual poverty causes them to mourn for their sins, for they will be comforted. When you see Jesus suffering and dying, do not weep for the injustice done to Him, but recognize that He is doing this for you, that YOU killed the Son of God by your sins.

As it says in the song “How Deep the Father’s Love for Us”: “It was my sins that held him there until it was accomplished. His dying breath has brought me life; I know that it is finished.”

Do you understand this? Does the death of Jesus move you, not because this good and unjust man died, but because it is your sins that made His death necessary? Weep for yourself when you see Jesus on the cross. Remember what Paul said:

2 Corinthians 7:10 - Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

There is a sorrow that leads to death, but there is also a sorrow that leads to repentance and life, as we saw a few weeks ago with Judas and Peter. As you see Jesus heading to the cross, recognize that you are so sinful that nothing less than the death of the son of God could save you. And yet you are so loved that He willingly gave His life for you.

2) “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”

Luke 23:33-36 - When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. ³⁵ The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.” ³⁶ The soldiers also came up and mocked him.

As Jesus is nailed to the cross and lifted up, we see that he is crucified between two criminals. And once again, Jesus says something shocking: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Once again, instead of focusing on his own pain and suffering, his primary concern is for those around him. And as they mock and torture him, he prays to the Father for their forgiveness.

Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing. If they truly understood who He was and what they were doing to Him, they would not put Him

to death. Father, forgive them in their ignorance. Even as He suffers, His heart is not for His own comfort or justice, but for the forgiveness of the world.

As J.C. Ryle put it, “As soon as the blood of the Great Sacrifice began to flow, the Great High Priest began to intercede.”

The crowd says crucify, and Jesus says forgive. Is there anything we can do that would cause Him to reject us?

Romans 5:6–8 - You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 8:1–2 - Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.

See how on the cross, Jesus forgave those who were torturing and mocking Him. See how He has done the same for you, offering forgiveness for even the worst things you have ever done through His death for your sins. Receive His grace today!

And if you have received His grace and forgiveness, see the power in praying what Jesus prayed towards those who have wronged you: Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing. This is a good thing to pray when we think of those who wrong us.

Matthew 5:43–45 - “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

“Do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves,” for judgment is coming and it is your sins that have made this death necessary. “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” Even in your sin, forgiveness and grace are offered, if you would recognize who Jesus is and what He is doing for you on that cross.

Just look at the countless fulfillments of prophecy in this short passage. As we see the crowd nailing him to the cross, mocking him, dividing up his clothes by casting lots, and offering him wine vinegar, we see the fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies about this Suffering Servant who will die for the sins of the world.

Psalm 22:1, 7-8, 14-18, 30-31 - My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? ⁷ All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. ⁸ “He trusts in the Lord,” they say, “let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.” ¹⁴ I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me. ¹⁵ My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me **in the dust of death**. ¹⁶ Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet. ¹⁷ All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. ¹⁸ They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment. ³⁰ Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord. ³¹ They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: He has done it!

Isaiah 53:3, 5-6, 12 - He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him **the iniquity of us all**... ¹² Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

And they put up a sign calling him “the King of the Jews.” It was customary to put up a public notice of the crime on the cross above the criminal, but since he had committed no crime, the Romans stuck it to the Jews, calling Jesus “the king of the Jews,” which is what they said he was claiming to be.

Finally, we see the interaction with the criminals next to Jesus.

Luke 23:39-43 - One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has

done nothing wrong.”⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”⁴³ Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

3) “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise”

As Jesus hangs on the cross, slowly asphyxiating, he is flanked by two criminals who view him in completely different ways and in the end will experience two completely different eternal destinies. One criminal speaks to Jesus with contempt, making selfish demands that Jesus would save them, take them off the cross. But the second man rebukes the first. **He essentially expresses three truths that are the cornerstone of saving faith: Jesus has done nothing wrong. We are guilty and deserve death. But Jesus is a King with an eternal Kingdom, and has the power to save us from our just condemnation.** And in return, Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” Your soul will be with me in paradise, in heaven, awaiting the final resurrection of the body. What a demonstration of the grace of God.

Notice: this man would never be baptized. He would not speak in tongues. He would not tithe, He would not use his gifts to serve others, He would not perform any sacraments. He probably did not have perfect theology. But He confessed His sin and that Jesus was Lord and Savior, and He received eternal life. This is the epitome of salvation by grace through faith; we are saved not because we have done anything to earn or deserve it, but solely because of the undeserved gift of God through Jesus who died for our sins. And on that day, Jesus says that the criminal would enter eternal life.

John 3:16–18 - For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.

The passage ends with this final section:

Luke 23:44–49 - It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon,⁴⁵ for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.⁴⁶ Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last.⁴⁷ The

centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, “Surely this was a **righteous man**.”⁴⁸ When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away.⁴⁹ But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

Jesus dies, and the curtain that separated sinful men and women from the holy God is torn in two, making a way for us to be right with God once and for all.

Judgment is coming. We will all suffer in this world, and one day we will stand before the Judge, who will evaluate our earthly life. The bad news is that none of us have measured up to God’s standard for eternal life, for all have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory. But the good news is that Jesus is the promised Messiah who has come to save the world from their sins.

Romans 3:22–25 - This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile,²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.²⁵ God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.

There are two options, and two destinies. Trust in Him as your Lord and Savior and come to Him, repenting of your sins and looking to Him for salvation. Or reject Him and face eternal death. Trust in Him today. And if you know Him, ask God to give you opportunities to share the gospel with others today.