

Luke 23:26-23:56**Calvary**

We are going to Luke 23 today. The entire story of the life of Jesus has been leading up to this moment, the pinnacle of human history, the center of our faith: the cross of Jesus.

Today we'll look at the biggest reason he came: to come and rescue us by giving his life and shedding his blood so we could be forgiven.

The place we look to see the best possible picture of God, and to know the heart of God, is to Jesus Christ. We can see some of what God is like from the world He has made: we know he's a perfect engineer, a perfect artist. We know he loves beauty. We know He's a God of power and might, because he made all of the mightiest things we can see. But the biggest and clearest place that we look to see Who God is is to Jesus Christ.

We believe that Jesus is God, who came among us. And just as you can look at a quarter and see what George Washington looked like, we can look to Jesus - who is the perfect image of an invisible God.

Colossians 1 15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the

dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

The message of the whole Bible is that Jesus is God among us, the fullness of God dwelled in him, the image of God was stamped in him. And the big thing he lived for was his mission to give us peace with God through the blood of his cross. That's the big message of the Bible and the big message of our church, and the big focus of the Gospel of Luke.

We look to Jesus, who is the second person of the trinity, to see what God is like, because He is God in flesh.

And this matters because looking at Him transforms us:

To see and believe who he is shapes us into his image. **1 John 3:2 “we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”**

We become like the God we worship, we are transformed by seeing Jesus, and so in seeing Jesus our hope today is to be transformed.

Jesus has been headed to this cross, in one sense since eternity past as this was always the plan. But back in Luke 9, there was a point where it said:

Luke 9:51 “51 When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

He was determined to do this. He had come for this. He has been on the road to this cross for weeks now. Because of what He had to accomplish.

Way back in Luke 9, Jesus was up on a mountain with Peter, James, and

John. There, Jesus was transfigured and was glowing white, and Moses and Elijah came down and talked to him.

Luke 9:30 “And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, 31 who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.”

And that word “departure” is the greek word for “exodus”. Jesus was going to lead an exodus in Jerusalem. Which brings to mind the image of Moses leading a great multitude through the Sea out of Egypt. You know Jesus would be a great rescuer if He was going to be leading an Exodus.

And now we get to Luke 23 and you see the exodus he is leading. Luke uniquely focuses on all the people that were following behind Jesus and walking with Jesus as he went to the cross at Calvary. Today we’ll see Simon of Cyrene (v.26), a “great multitude of people” (27), a large group of women mourning and lamenting (27), two criminals that are “led away to be put to death with him” (32), rulers (35), and soldiers (36). The final exodus, led by Jesus the true and better Moses, has begun.

And in each of the interactions with the different people in this procession, Jesus shows us more of his heart:

Romans 5:8 “but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

And in this whole narrative of Christ going to the cross, you see what His love looks like.

I. Simon

Luke 23 26 And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus.

So with Jesus already weak from the blood-loss and beatings, the soldiers conscript Simon of Cyrene to carry what was probably the heavy cross-beam of the cross.

Simon was probably a North African Jew, coming in to Jerusalem, probably to worship with the multitudes at 9am. He was coming in to meet God in the holiest place they had, but a soldier grabs him and tells him he's going to be carrying the cross instead.

He expected his experience with God to be filled with singing and celebration, and instead he's carrying a cross. He doesn't know at the time that this is the Son of God he is carrying the cross for. He doesn't realize this parade of people he's walking in is a true and better Exodus. But this was God's plan for him this day.

And so often we're like Simon: we come to God with an expectation - going to worship Him will satisfy me and the day will be sweet. But, like Simon, every one of us who will follow after Jesus also has a cross laid on us.

“The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death—we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship

So right here in this Exodus parade that Jesus is leading, you see a close follower of Jesus, carrying a cross. And every follower of Jesus since has born one as well.

And there is a stark contrast between that kind of Christianity and the Christianity that's made soft and easy. We've made church into a brand that we buy, and we've made worship mainly about self-expression. But following Christ, for Simon, and everyone behind him in history's procession, has taken up a cross to follow Christ. And there is deep and rich celebration, real laughter, real singing, Christianity is a celebratory faith. But there is no following Jesus and rejecting the way of Simon here, carrying a cross.

II. The Women

Luke 23: 27 And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. 28 But turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. 29 For 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!' 30 Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' 31 For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

Next in line following Jesus is a multitude of people, and Luke especially mentions the women who were mourning.

The women are spotlighted in Luke's Gospel. In all four of the Gospels, there are no women hostile to Jesus. In Luke's Gospel, women are singled out for the blessings of Jesus. They were considered to be some of the lowest of all people, but not to Jesus, who even in this chapter and the next will give them the high places of preparing the body of Jesus for burial, of being some of the first to the tomb on Sunday, of being the first to announce the resurrection.

But the fact that the women were not hostile to Jesus didn't mean they were yet obedient.

So Jesus turns to these women who are following Him, mourning, and He says "don't weep for me, weep for yourselves and your kids - bad days are coming." He had warned them that Jerusalem would be destroyed, that those who didn't take Him at His word would remain in the city in 70 AD and be wiped out. The judgment on the city would be severe.

And He says, **"For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"**

And it seems in this warning that Jesus is the green wood - the wood that doesn't easily burn. But look what's happening here - Jesus is going to the cross, He is going to experience the wrath of God. And he doesn't deserve it - He's the green wood, the kind that doesn't burn. So how much more can they expect of the wrath of God when they do deserve it.

So Jesus is walking to Calvary, and takes the time to turn and give these people this word of warning. Remember that in everything Christ did for this on this day, He was demonstrating His love for us.

And in our day we have a very sentimental definition of love - love is when you make me feel good. And love, to us, is always affirmation and acceptance. You tell me I'm OK, I'm enough, I'm fine just the way I am.

But let's not try to be more loving than Jesus on Calvary. Jesus, in love, warned them of what they were facing.

Love provides a way for people to enter into grace. Love provides a path to redemption. But love does not say someone who is not OK is OK yet. Love

offers grace, but doesn't pretend someone is not in need of grace and repentance.

This comes up fairly often here. Someone is sleeping with his girlfriend, and wants the people at church to love and accept him. And we do - we all need grace, we all need forgiveness, we all bring baggage and sins, none of us have anything to boast about. So we say, "We're all people like you, we're glad you want to walk closely with Jesus, so we'll help you move out, we'll help you get things right in your life and act honorably toward God and this woman."

And at that point, some are thankful for the offer. But often, the response is, "No, I'm not going to do that." And we'll say that we can't follow Jesus without repentance, without turning, and we'll help you turn and be patient with you and forgive your million failings because we all need the same thing." But when someone doesn't want to give up an idol, which they need to give up for their own good, a frequent response is, "You're not being loving for not accepting my behavior."

By that standard, Jesus isn't loving. On the way to calvary, Jesus is loving enough to stop and warn them of the destruction that is headed their way. He doesn't accept everybody regardless of their behavior, He offers grace to everyone who will turn to Him from sin, regardless of what that sin was.

When we get selfish and just want to do what we want to do, we redefine love. We go to Hallmark for our definition of love and not to the scriptures.

And in our age of the self, when worship in our minds is all about self-expression, the thought that God might not be pleased with me being exactly who I feel like I should be is foreign.

"A foolish physician is he that will let a sick man die for fear of troubling him"
- Baxter.

Jesus turns to these women, they're the daughters of Jerusalem, they represent all of Jerusalem and what is facing them if they don't turn to Christ, and even though Jesus has enough problems of His own at this point, even though He is already in agony, He warns them.

Luke 23:32 Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 33 And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. 34 And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. 35 And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" 36 The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine 37 and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" 38 There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews.

This whole crucifixion was set up to mock and humiliate Jesus.

Pilate ordered the inscription to be hung over Jesus's head "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

And they mock Jesus for being who he is: The soldiers laugh at His claim to be king, because a king doesn't go to the cross. They don't realize that from here He is reigning over satan, sin, and death and that He'll be worshipped for that cross for generations.

The rulers mock Jesus's claims to be able to save anyone - he saved others let Him save Himself. They don't realize that He could save Himself, He could avoid the cross, but if He saves Himself, He won't be the savior to others.

But to them, the claims that Jesus makes to be Savior and King are completely inconsistent with the cross.

Cicero called crucifixion: “the most cruel and horrifying punishment.” It was designed to inflict maximum pain, to prolong the suffering, and to do so in a way that would cause the masses to fear ever crossing the power of Rome.

It was a humiliating and terrifying death. That’s not how kings die (unless they’ve been deposed.) That’s not how saviors die.

It is so category shattering that God would become man and go to a cross that the whole idea is rejected outright in other religions.

The Qur’an calls the idea of a crucified Jesus “a monstrous falsehood.”

Some gnostic gospels said it was actually Simon of Cyrene that was crucified. Some have said Jesus only appeared to be crucified. Because how could we ever make room for God who becomes man and goes to such a humiliating and weak place?

But even though they’re mocking and torturing him, Jesus prays **"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."**

Look at who Jesus is right up to death: he’s not being a typical hero or martyr who is shouting about how innocent He is (even though He was innocent.)

Going to death, he cares about the grief of the women. He warns them so they could avoid judgment. He prays for forgiveness for those who are torturing and mocking and killing him.

Isaiah 53 “**3** He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. **4** Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. **5** But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. **6** All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned--every one--to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. **7** He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

Jesus goes to the cross bearing sin, carrying grief, mocked, despised, Isaiah 53:11 predicted:

Isaiah 53:11-12 “**Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.**”

Jesus is out to pardon the many, to carry their griefs, to offer them a pardon. He makes intercession for them, he prays for them, and bares their sin.

Look at some of these others who followed Jesus in that procession to Calvary:

Luke 23:39 One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" **40** But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? **41** And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due

reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." 42 And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43 And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

So Jesus is crucified between these two thieves. Isaiah 53:12 said He would be numbered with the transgressors.

One picks up the mockery of the soldiers and the rulers: if you're the king and Christ, act like it, save us. He just wants off the cross, and unless Jesus can end this suffering now He is no good to him.

The other, growing weaker, begins to fear God. And he tells the mocker to stop. He sees that he deserves this, he doesn't ask to get off of the cross. He just makes a plea to Jesus and is saved.

And the thief that is saved knows a few important things: he is sinful, Jesus is not, and he desperately needs Jesus to save him.

And through that simple faith he is saved. He went to paradise with Jesus that day.

And he is the only person whose conversation with Jesus at the cross is recorded by Luke.

So in Luke's focus, Jesus speaks to the Father from the cross, and He speaks to this sinner who deserved to die.

In the Old Testament book of Job, Job suffered and spent much of the book wrestling with the realities of being a person who wants to have a relationship with God but struggles to. And at one point he said this:

Job 9:32-35 "For he is not a man, as I am, that I might answer him, that we should come to trial together.

33There is no arbiter between us,
who might lay his hand on us both.
34Let him take his rod away from me,
and let not dread of him terrify me.
35 Then I would speak without fear of him,
for I am not so in myself.”

So in verse 33, he laments that there's no arbiter between God and man. We are so far beneath Him, how do you meet in the middle with this infinite being, how do you ever really know God, how can you ever speak without fear of him.

He says I wish there was a mediator, someone between God and man. He will always seem so far off.

But we fast forward to the cross, where Jesus is the answer to Job's lament:

He is speaking with the lowly sinner on the other cross, the man who is judged and dying. And He's speaking to the Father.

Jesus is continuing to be on the cross who He has always been - God who became man. Who is with a dying sinner in his misery, and always interceding, praying to the Father. Perfect God without any sin so He can approach the Father, and perfect man right there dying beside this man.

Luke 23:44 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.

So there's darkness in the land. In the Old Testament, darkness at mid-day was a sign of God's judgment:

Amos 8:9 "And on that day," declares the Lord GOD, "I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight."

And the curtain in the temple separated the most holy place from the rest of the temple. It was a veil that hung symbolically between God and man. And it tore in two.

The wrath of God had been satisfied. Jesus had accomplished his mission. He was abandoned so we could be found. He was the sacrifice necessary for our sins, and now that His blood was spilled, we could approach God.

And Jesus commits his spirit back to the Father. And He dies.

Let's not move too quickly to what we should do.

The Bible contains many laws, and they are the word of God, we are called to obey.

The Bible is loaded with wisdom for living.

There is a lot we should do with what we see here.

But here at the center of the Bible, at the center of history, is not something we do at all. But there's Gospel.

"The gospel is sheer good tidings, not demand, but promise, not duty, but gift" - Bavinck.

At the cross, God met our biggest need, and showed us what our biggest need is not.

Our biggest need is not some advice and direction.

Sometimes we make it seem like that's all we need. In the traditional church, that direction comes in a list of rules you can follow to be a good Christian and be accepted by the Christian community, which include some real rules from the bible and usually a handful of additional ones about how to dress on Sunday, the length of your hair, and the type of music you listen to.

In contemporary church, you don't have the same rules, but you have the same principle. You need really relevant advice for how to live your life, and now the rules don't feel like rules, they feel like motivational slogans on how to live your life - live your best life now, be a better you.

Really, that sounds pretty good and pretty Christian. That sounds like a changed life, and isn't Christianity all about lives changing?

Lives changing is great, and Jesus changes lives.

Rules are not all bad. Direction is not bad (in God's grace he has loaded the bible with good direction for our lives. You'd really have to twist proverbs into weird allegories to say that God isn't telling us what to do there - He is - and that's good.)

But if we read the Bible and just come away with laws and directions and slogans and advice, our faith will absolutely rot from the inside.

If we think that all we need is better advice so we can do more and try harder, we are set up for a fall.

If we give look for hope by turning inwardly, turning to look within ourselves, and then we look at our own transformation as the basis for our sense of well being, it will just never seem like enough. Because we are so plagued by our sin. We try to run away from it, but we're running away from the clothes we're wearing.

So its bad news to tell people that our message, at its heart, is you can change and you just need guidance.

You'll never change enough. That isn't the cure we need. We may call it Gospel, but it isn't Gospel.

The word Gospel means good news, but we have substituted it with bad news, do more try harder find direction get cured.

The Gospel, the good news, is not, "Here's what you need to do."

The good news is that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, that he rose again.

So the gospel, the good news, is not anything that I've done, or anything I need to do. It's that Christ is the Savior, Christ is the mediator between God and man, Christ died for our sins and the curtain was torn in two.

And we receive that good news not by doing, but by believing. By faith and repentance.

And then, empowered and changed by the Gospel, we live different lives.

It may have been John Bunyan who wrote:

*Run, John, run, the law commands
But gives us neither feet nor hands,
Better news the gospel brings:
It bids us fly and gives us wings¹*

¹ Also, it may not have been: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/run-john-run/>

The Gospel brings us forgiveness and grace, and so changes our hearts that new lives of faith and obedience result.

You see just a bit of it in the observers of this who ordeal:

Luke 23:47 Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent!"

The centurion, the first gentile to believe after the death of Christ, has his eyes open to who Christ is and has new spiritual perception. Then you see mourning over sin:

Luke 23:48 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.

You see courage and generosity:

Luke 23:50 Now there was a man named Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea. He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man, 51 who had not consented to their decision and action; and he was looking for the kingdom of God. 52 This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. 53 Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid. 54 It was the day of Preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning. 55 The women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid. 56 Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

There are all kinds of practical overflows from believing the Gospel, and if we believe it, we should expect to see efforts at obedience, works of love,

overflows of mercy and care, proclamations of the good news.

God has made us to be a people zealous for good works, but they are the fruit of Gospel belief, not the root of our faith.

Sermon Discussion Questions.

- 1) Why is it significant that Jesus has conversations only with the thief and the Father from the cross (in Luke's Gospel)?
- 2) Discuss the procession of people that followed Christ to calvary. Do you identify with any of them? Which of them has a story that might resemble yours? Why?
- 3) Read Isaiah 53:1-12. How do you see it fulfilled in Luke 23?
- 4) Discuss the difference between the Gospel as good news and good advice.
- 5) What is the relationship between God's law and the Gospel?
- 6) What is the place for obedience in the Christian life if it cannot save?