



THE GOSPEL OF
Luke

SESSION OBJECTIVE: LUKE 23:26-56

To understand more about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Simon Says

One of the more mysterious figures in the Passion story is mentioned in Luke 23:26 as “Simon of Cyrene.” Cyrene is located in northern Africa and had a large contingency of Jewish believers there. The Jewish historian Josephus recalls that Jews constituted one of the four dominant classes in Cyrene (Ant. 14:114–15). There was also a Cyreniac synagogue in Jerusalem that was used for festivals. Mark’s account tells us that he was also “the father of Alexander and Rufus” (Mk. 15:21), and scholars believe that Rufus is likely the same Rufus that Paul mentions in Romans 16:13. Paul refers to him as “God’s chosen one,” which is a standard term for believers in Pauline theology, but given the way he singles Rufus out in Romans 16 could also mean that he was emphasizing the closeness of Rufus to the Lord through his father’s role in carrying Jesus’ cross.

There is often the idea thrown around that Simon had compassion on Jesus, and his compassion is what motivated him to volunteer to carry Jesus’ cross, but upon further examination of the Scripture, there is no actual textual evidence of such motivation. In all three synoptic accounts (Matt. 27:32; Mk. 15:21; Lk. 23:26) Simon is “compelled” by those leading Jesus to be crucified, and John’s Gospel doesn’t mention him at all. Both Luke and Mark record that he “was coming in from the country” and Mark also refers to him as a “passerby.” He *may have* had compassion on Jesus, or he *might have* simply been put under the same kind of pressure that Pilate had been put under and simply relented to it. Either way, we should not speak where Scripture is silent.

Further Warning to Jerusalem

Recall the in-depth woes pronounced over Jerusalem by Jesus just as He arrived in the city (Lk. 19:41-44). Jesus lamented over His beloved city because of the judgment and destruction that would soon fall upon her for their rebellion and rejection of God's Messiah. Now, as He is being led to the cross, He further explicates this judgment in response to the women who were weeping for Him: "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children" (Lk. 23:28). He speaks of "days that are coming" in which people will think barren women are blessed "and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed" (Lk. 23:29). Elsewhere in Luke, childlessness was seen as a shame and a disgrace in Israel (Lk. 1:25), and the Old Testament records similar sentiments as well (Gen. 30:23; Is. 4:1). These are, of course, human reactions, not divine truths. It is not a shame for a woman to not bear children and there are a variety of reasons for why this might happen, but children are a gift from God and a blessing (Ps. 127:3) and so it is shocking to hear Jesus say that the blessed woman in Jerusalem will be the one who does not have children. Why does He say this? Because the harshness of judgment that is soon to befall this city will be brutal. Whole families, children included, will be murdered (Lk. 19:44). It would be better to have no children at all than to experience the loss that mothers would eventually experience in the fall of Jerusalem. Beyond that, people will beg for death (Lk. 23:30).

This is, more or less, the final warning to those in Jerusalem to flee for safety. Jerusalem has been found guilty, and though she has been given multiple opportunities to repent, she has only doubled down in her rebellion. There is, again, irony in this moment. Jesus has been wrongfully judged and condemned to die and yet as He is led to the cross, he is not the judged but the Judge, spelling out His judgment that will come to pass.

Verse 31 presents an interpretive challenge. It's a proverbial statement, but the meaning is not totally clear. Obviously the word picture is that dry wood burns much more effectively than green, wet wood. But who is the wood, and who is "they" that is doing the burning? Several suggestions have been made. It might be that the "they" refers to Rome. If Rome is willing to execute a man who is innocent (the green wood), how much worse will it be when they execute those who are guilty (the dry wood)? The green wood in this case is Jesus, and the dry wood is Jerusalem. Contextually this makes sense given it follows Jesus pronouncement of judgment on Jerusalem which we know will historically be carried by Rome in 70 AD. It might also refer to the judgment of God, which is essentially just a fuller understanding of the first suggestion given that God judges nations in history through other nations.

The Crucifixion

Verses 32 through 43 present the actual crucifixion. Jesus, along with "two others" (Lk. 23:32) was brought to "the place that is called The Skull" and there "they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left" (Lk. 23:33). Below is a breakdown of some of the key details.

THE SKULL

The location of the crucifixion in Luke's account is simply indicated as "The Skull," but more can be said of this place. The other three Gospel accounts refer to this location in its Aramaic name, *Golgotha* (Matt. 27:33; Mk. 15:22; Jn. 19:17). Luke simply uses the Greek term *κρανίον*, the word from which we get our English word "cranium." The Latin term for skull, *calvaria*, is also sometimes transliterated by English speakers and referred to as Calvary. The early church fathers had various ideas about why it was named as such. Jerome (347-420) thought it was a place of beheading. Pseudo-Tertullian described it as a place resembling a head. Origen

(185-253) associated it with legends concerning the skull of Adam. Contemporary scholarship has suggested perhaps it is better understood as “Gol Goatha,” which could be interpreted to mean “a hill of execution.” Regardless, the emphasis in the Gospel Accounts that it was outside of the city is consistent with the Jewish practice to execute people away from the city in order to not contaminate it with death (Num. 15:35-36; Acts 7:58).

THE PRAYER

Jesus prays while hanging from the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk. 23:34). But what is it that they are unknowingly doing? The obvious answer is crucifying the Messiah. However, there may be even more that Jesus has in mind here. The details immediately following this prayer are revealing: “And they cast lots to divide his garments.” This is reminiscent of Psalm 22:18, a well-known Messianic Psalm: “They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.” In fact, John’s account explicitly ties this action to the fulfillment of this Psalm (Jn. 19:24). It might be that what Jesus means by “they know not what they do,” is more than simply killing the Messiah. They are acting as pawns, playing into God’s foreordained plan to crush the anointed One, and they are completely unaware of it.

THE TWO CRIMINALS

Jesus is crucified along with two criminals, “one on his right and one on his left” (Lk. 23:33). John says it similarly: “There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them” (Jn. 19:18). Luke gives the most extensive treatment to this conversation between Jesus and one of the criminals. One of them joins the taunts of the crowds in verse 39 saying “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” However, he is met with a sharp rebuke from the other criminal: “But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong” (Lk. 23:40-41). Remarkably, this criminal confesses his guilt and also recognizes the innocence of Jesus, doing what many of the rich people in Jesus’ parables could not. He then asks Jesus: “Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom” (Lk. 23:42). Jesus’ response breaks much of what we think should be required of someone to enjoy eternity with God forever: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk. 23:43). The criminal is unbaptized, knows essentially nothing of Scripture, and yet because of a simple confession of sin, a repentant heart, and faith, he is given clearance to be with God forever. This also speaks to the immediate presence with God that one enjoys upon death. While the resurrection guarantees a bodily eternity with God in the new heavens and earth (Rev. 21:1-8), believers will be with God immediately in the Spirit in the time between death and resurrection (2 Cor. 5:1-8).

What About Now?

One important takeaway is the reality that God is sovereign and that His plans, even involving an unjust death, are perfect. Nothing about Jesus’ death is good or right and yet it was God’s plan from the foundations of the earth to crucify Christ (Rev. 13:8). Another takeaway is the importance of simply confessing sin, repenting, and believing the Gospel. No other means lead to salvation (Jn. 14:6; Acts 4:12; Rom. 10:9).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Luke 23:26. Who was compelled to carry the cross for Jesus? Where was he from? Who is he?
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2. Read Luke 23:27-31. Who followed Jesus and what were they doing? What did Jesus say to the women who were weeping? Who does Jesus say will be “blessed?”
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Day Two

1. Read Luke 23:32-33. Who was crucified with Jesus? Who were they? Where were they crucified? What is the significance of the name of the place? (Hint: See above notes)
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2. Read Luke 23:34. What did Jesus pray? What is the Old Testament significance of this detail? (Hint: See above notes)
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Day Three

1. Read Luke 22:35-37. What did the people say while He was being crucified? What did they offer Him?
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2. Read Luke 22:38. What inscription was placed over Jesus?
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Day Four

1. Read Luke 22:39-41. What did the first criminal say to Jesus? What did the second criminal say in response to the first criminal?
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2. Read Luke 22:42-43. What did the second criminal ask of Jesus and how did Jesus respond to him?
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Week 84 Discussion: Confession

In the crucifixion narrative of Luke 23:26-43, Jesus is crucified with two criminals. The first criminal joins the crowds in jeering at Jesus, but the second criminal confesses his sin and believes Jesus to be the Messiah, and this saves him (Lk. 23:41-43). Talk about the importance of acknowledging and confessing your sin as a group, and both the benefits and consequences we face when we do this.

1. Icebreaker: Have you ever thoroughly confessed your sin to another person? If so, share with the group what that experience was like. If not, why not?
2. Why do most people avoid confession?

3. Is it possible to believe the Gospel without confessing your sin? Why or why not?
4. Should you confess your sin to any person, or is there wisdom in being selective? Why?
5. Have you ever received someone's confession? Without giving personal details, talk about what that experience was like.
6. How can the church better encourage transparency and confession as a daily practice?

Takeaways:

1. Jesus is crucified with two criminals at the place called The Skull in fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies.
2. Jesus guarantees one of the criminals that he will be in heaven with him the same day.