

*Crucified*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*Psalm 22:12-21, Romans 8:31-39, Luke 23:26-56*

Today's final Scripture reading comes from Luke 23:26-56. Listen now to God's Word. "As they 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. A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then "they will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!" For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals – one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One." The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last. The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man." When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things. Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea and he was waiting for the kingdom of God. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid. It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin. The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment."

For a month, we've been leading here. We've heard Peter's denials. We've heard Jesus declared innocent by both Herod and Pilate despite the accusations of the religious leaders. We've seen the injustice of Pilate's decision to give in to the mob rather than to protect Jesus. And now we come to the crossroads of history...the crucifixion of Jesus.

This event is a part of our cultural memory. No one in the United States is unfamiliar with the cross. They may not understand it, they may reject or ridicule it, but they are aware of it. Perhaps we are *too* close to it. The empty cross signifies victory over death...but the cross itself was one of the most brutal forms of torture ever invented. We see crosses every day, but they lose their meaning. We wear it as jewelry, we adapt it into our architecture, but what's the deeper significance? I want to explore that with you today as we look both at what isn't a part of the crucifixion story in Luke and what is. You might be as surprised as I was when I started looking at the text itself, but maybe if we look carefully, we can see the crucifixion through fresh eyes.

I want to start by mentioning two things that aren't a part of the crucifixion story that might surprise us. The first is this: *Jesus' suffering is not a key element of the crucifixion*. An argument could be made that we are too far away from it to comprehend the suffering, that a film like **The Passion of the Christ** helps us understand what it was like. But when we look at Jewish books outside of the Bible like 1 and 2 Maccabees, we see that the deaths of Jewish martyrs were often described in great detail, as if the gore made their sacrifice all the more holy. Some Christian theology over the centuries has latched hold of the suffering of Jesus as the lynchpin of salvation. It's from that theology that we find stories of the "Via Dolorosa," which means "the way of suffering," and the concept of "stations of the cross" where Jesus fell along the road to Golgotha. It even explains the symbol of the crucifix, of Christ dying upon the cross, as the central picture of Christianity. There's the thought that it's the torment of Christ that is what saves us.

The problem is, a focus on Jesus' suffering doesn't have a biblical basis. The sum total that Luke says is, "they crucified Him." That doesn't mean Jesus didn't suffer. By no means! But neither Luke nor any of the other gospel writers is interested in a bloody blow-by-blow reenactment. It isn't the suffering that saves us. Jesus lived a life of suffering. He suffered just by giving up all His glory and honor and power that He had with the Father and coming to live with us, as one of us. It is through His sacrificial death that we are released from the power of sin, and His resurrection proves His words and proves that we can have new life in Him. So while we should acknowledge that Christ suffered on our behalf, that He was punished in our place, we don't need to dwell on His suffering. The Bible doesn't.

The second thing that isn't a part of the crucifixion story is this: *there's no explanation as to how it all works*. The Bible makes passing references to Jesus' death on the cross ransoming us, being a sacrifice of atonement, of dying in our place. Over the centuries, scholars and theologians have tried to get a handle on what exactly Christ did for us. Did Jesus somehow trick the devil by being given as a ransom only to then in His perfection be worth more than the debt? Did Jesus pay for every sin ever committed? Did His death cover the sins of all people or only those who would be saved? Or was Jesus' death merely a show of complete and utter obedience to the Father, and that obedience is what saves? The Bible gives more weight to some of these answers than others.

But ultimately, figuring out how God worked out salvation through Christ is not important to Luke so much as the fact that He did it. It's kind of like when I get a gift from somebody – let's say a DVD that I've been waiting a long time to see. I'm always curious where they go it and what they paid for it – because I'm cheap. But wondering about the price and if I could have gotten a better deal is actually the furthest thing from opening the wrapping and watching the movie I've been waiting to see. The same is true with understanding the ins and outs of salvation. We should want to understand what the Bible tells us, and the fact that Jesus died for us while we were still sinners should humble and amaze us. But the Bible isn't interested in the "how" God makes it all work so much as it is accepting the gift and living out the life given to us through Jesus' sacrifice.

Now I want to move on to two things that are a part of the crucifixion story, things that are amazing given the terror of the moment. The first is this: *Jesus is compassionate and giving towards others right to the very end.* His first sign of compassion is when He speaks to the women who have come to mourn for Him. He isn't worried about himself at all; He says don't weep for me. As He is being led to His death, He is more concerned for them and their fate. He knows that this very generation, less than forty years hence, is going to see the destruction of Jerusalem and the disintegration of Israel. He's actually prophesying on his way to the cross! He knows the fate of Israel will be horrific beyond explanation. His comment about the green tree and the dry tree is a comment how green wood doesn't burn easily but dry wood does. If things are this bad and the tree of Israel is green now, how bad will it be when the wood of Israel is dry and ready for burning! As He speaks to the women of Jerusalem, He shows a total lack of self-pity. He cares more about others than He does Himself.

This compassion continues as the passage progresses. The men almost certainly roped Him to the cross, as was most common in that era. His being nailed to the cross would have been an additional punishment that the other two criminals might not have even experienced; the ropes would have held his weight had the nails failed to do so. In the midst of this, as He is being placed upon the cross, Jesus says, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." According to the text, these are precisely the same ones who have stripped Him naked and are gambling for His clothes. The ones who have not just placed Him on the cross but have also utterly shamed Him, He forgives. He is reaching out to show mercy to the very ones responsible. But this statement also goes out to the crowd, the religious leaders, the very people who mock and despise Him. Jesus is asking the Father to forgive all who are involved in this act of blasphemy. I think about how easy it is for me to say an unkind word when I've had a bad day or to say something I shouldn't when I've gotten hit by a speeding racquetball. But Jesus endures incredible pain and in the midst of it, forgives. For me, it is totally humbling and makes me realize just how incredible Jesus is.

There's one last act of compassion to come. Jesus tells the repentant thief that he will be with Him today in paradise. The thief knows his sin and knows that he is being justly punished, but Jesus has done nothing. The thief asks very little of Jesus, just to be remembered. But he also expresses a deep belief in the lordship of Jesus, acknowledging that Jesus will come into His own kingdom. But Jesus far more than remembers the thief. Jesus promises him a place, promises him eternal life. Each word would have been painful to say, yet Jesus in the midst of suffering comforts the criminal who has turned to God in his final hours.

For us, I think the takeaway from this is not necessarily just “go and do what Jesus did.” We can’t. The situation was unique and the suffering incomparable to what we normally face. But it does remind us that Jesus Himself thought of others when it would have been perfectly natural from a human perspective for Him to think about Himself. Jesus ushers us into an era of selflessness in spite of ourselves. When Jesus tells us to take up the cross and follow Him, it’s not just a death to self as if the self doesn’t exist any more but a turning of our self to others and helping *them* in *their* trials and sufferings. Jesus’ compassion on the cross shows us that living selflessly may actually be what allows us to cope with our own pain. When we reach out in our own suffering, not only is our own pain lessened, but we become relatable to others. Jesus was a wounded healer, able to empathize with suffering because He Himself suffered. We too can live out the path of the wounded healer where we know the only lasting cure comes through Jesus.

And that points us to the last focal point of Luke’s discussion of the crucifixion: *even as Jesus dies, salvation is erupting all around Him*. Nowhere else in the whole gospel of Luke does the Greek term “*sozo*” come up as much as it does in this reading. Depending on the context, “*sozo*” can be changed into a noun or a verb, and it means “to rescue” or “to save” or “salvation.” It comes up three times in the derision of Jesus. The rulers say it; the soldiers say it; the mocking thief says it. “If you are the Son of God, the Christ, the King of the Jews, save yourself.” In fact, it’s a pattern we’ve seen before, back when Jesus was tempted in the desert by Satan. Satan started his temptations with, “If you are the Son of God...” These calls to save Himself were no less demonic than Satan’s temptations at the start of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus is being asked to prove Himself in a way that will deny the Father’s plans and purposes.

But it’s at the third request for Jesus to save someone that it does, in fact, happen. The thief repeats the same screed as the others – if you are the Christ, save yourself – and he adds, “Save us!” This is where things get interesting. Jesus is finally asked to save someone else, and the second thief rejects the mocking of the first. He acknowledges Jesus’ innocence and his own guilt. Then he declares Jesus king by his statement, asking to be remembered when Jesus enters His Kingdom. The statements of this second thief are amazing. It’d be tempting to figure out what led him to this place. Was he someone who’d heard of Jesus and listened to his teachings? The other gospels say that both thieves mocked Jesus – did he listen to his own words and realize that they were a lie? We don’t know. What we do know is that he conveys repentance, belief, and trust in Jesus in a way that even the disciples who’ve been with Jesus for years haven’t been able to express. This is not something of his own human doing. This is a Holy Spirit moment, a time when God reaches out and speaks to this man and then through this man, bringing him to the point of salvation. Jesus will not save Himself because that would be disobedient, but the moment He is asked to save others as is His Father’s will, it happens.

But more than one person has a salvation moment that day. Joseph of Arimathea was a member of the Jewish religious council called the Sanhedrin, but he didn’t consent to Jesus’ trial or condemnation. That didn’t make him a believer, but later events show that he became one that day. By Jewish traditional law, the executed were not given a private burial but were placed in a common grave as a final humiliation. Joseph defies the Pharisees’ tradition by burying Jesus in his own tomb. What’s more, his request for Jesus’ body from Pilate would have been done in public, which means he declares his allegiance to Jesus to all those who had opposed and murdered Him. It was a very real risk taken by one who believed Jesus was the Christ.

Salvation even extends well beyond the expected boundaries. Women were seen as second-class citizens in Israel, yet Luke mentions them several times in his account. They stand with the disciples at a distance from the crucifixion, but they go the step beyond and follow Joseph to the tomb. They are an integral part of God's salvation plan. The account goes so far as to mention the centurion who praised God and says of Jesus, "Surely this was a righteous man." A man outside the Jewish faith, one who likely as not hung Jesus on the cross himself, comes to a stunning realization as to Jesus' true identity. Salvation is no longer just for the Jews, but at the foot of the cross even Gentiles long thought cursed by God can come and find redemption. Salvation is breaking out all over, in the lives of Jews *and* pagans, men *and* women, religious leaders *and* cursed thieves alike. All are guilty under the law, but through this man Jesus, salvation enters in.

We're told that as Jesus was crucified, the temple veil was torn in two. This was the veil that separated the Most Holy Place from every other part of the temple. No one could go into this place but the high priest, and he could only enter once a year on the day of atonement to make a sacrifice. It was the place the Jews thought that God resided within the temple. When the veil was torn, it showed us that God was no longer separated from us. He had taken down the partition. The faithful could now approach Him. The way was opened up for everyone to come...you and me and anyone else who would be drawn to know God.

Rather than teaching us something we can do, I think this truth teaches us something to look for. Wherever Jesus is, salvation is. Even if there's sorrow or tragedy or heartbreak, there's the joy of knowing that God is good and salvation has come through our Lord and Savior. Where the Holy Spirit is moving and spreading the name of Jesus, lives are changed and people are moving from despair to hope. Peace blooms in the midst of anger; love spreads where once there was hate. These things may not be on the surface – often times we pretend to be joyful on the outside to mask our own problems – but they are there and they are real and they can't be taken away by anything the world throws at us. As our passage today from Romans says, when we are saved by Him, nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

So that's what we must be looking for. Do we have that salvation in our lives? Do we believe and trust in Jesus? Do we see Him working in us? In our church? Are we showing the signs that salvation is in our midst? If not, why not? Because when salvation is in your midst, there is joy you cannot deny. Perhaps we've hidden it; perhaps we've lost the spark we once had. But we can have it back. Because if salvation can be found in the midst of the crucifixion, we can find it now knowing that Jesus has been raised from the dead and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty in glory. Let's head home today ready to share Jesus' compassion, to live for others, sharing the joy of salvation with the world around us.