

May 28, 2023

IN MY PLACE CONDEMNED HE STOOD

Luke 23:26-49

(13 of 16 in a series through Luke 16-24)

Just before the turn of the century, the well-known church historian, Jaroslav Pelikan, wrote, “Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the most dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries.”¹ No doubt he’s right. And perhaps the one detail that most people know about Jesus’ life is that he died. More specifically, he died on a cross, undergoing the horrendous and shameful death of crucifixion. It was a means of execution that the Romans practiced that is painful even to describe. The individual being crucified would carry a crossbeam with him to the place of his execution, and then he’d be tied or nailed through his wrists and feet to a vertical post where he would hang, struggling to breathe and eventually suffocating to death. Typically he’d be stripped of his clothing to add to the humiliation of the event, and all of this would take place in a very public area in order to serve as a deterrent to anyone else who might be tempted to challenge Rome.

You’ll see as we work through our text this morning in Luke 23:26-49 that this is precisely what happened with Jesus. But you’ll also notice that Luke, like the other gospel writers, doesn’t go into the details of crucifixion. He doesn’t describe Jesus struggling to breathe or menacing in pain as insects descend on his bleeding wounds or anything of the sort. And it’s not because all of those things weren’t his experience. They certainly were. He became man so that he might die, just as we die. When he breathed his last, his heart stopped beating, his neurons stopped firing, his lungs stopped inflating, and his body became lifeless, just as each of us will experience at death. But I think the reason Luke doesn’t dive into these details is because what matters most to him isn’t the nature of how Jesus died but the *meaning* of Jesus’ death. Luke is more concerned with what Jesus’ death accomplished, what benefits it brings to us, and who it shows that Jesus is. And I want to bring these elements—his saving work and who he is—together as we consider who the cross shows us that Jesus is. First, then, we see that he is the suffering savior.

Jesus is the suffering savior

In order to save us Jesus had to bear the wrath of God for sinners on the cross. And the Bible is clear about both of those elements. That is, it is clear that on the cross Jesus bears the wrath of God, and it is clear that if we were to be saved there was no other way. This is made most clear in Jesus’ prayer in the garden. You’ll remember from that prayer, he’d pictured his coming impending death in that moment as drinking from a cup. He’d prayed, “Let this cup pass from

¹ *Jesus through the Centuries: His place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 1.

me,” but nevertheless willingly submitted to the Father’s will. And when he utilized that image of drinking from a cup, he was using a familiar Old Testament image of the cup of the wine of God’s wrath. Therefore, as we see Jesus’ suffering and death in verses 26-49, what we’re seeing is Jesus drink down the cup of God’s wrath that should have been poured out on us. And though Luke merely records Jesus praying, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me,” Mark tells us that Jesus prayed that “if it were possible, the hour might pass from him” (Mark 14:35). That is, if there were any other way he might save his people without drinking down the wrath of God that we merited, then that is what he wanted. But there was no other way. And it’s not just in the garden that we see that this death is a bearing of God’s wrath, we also see it in the darkness covering the land from noon until three in the afternoon.

Luke tells us in verse 44, “It was now about the sixth hour [12:00 PM], and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour [3:00 PM].” And I don’t think there’s any way you can see this as natural. I went and saw a full solar eclipse a few years back up in Western Kentucky, and it lasted about two minutes, not three hours. This was supernatural darkness. God was placing darkness over the land in an obviously supernatural way. And even here if we consider this imagery in the Old Testament, it is an image of divine wrath. So, for example, when the Lord was announcing his coming judgment in Amos 8:9 he declared, “‘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 now this same sign of judgment shows itself as Jesus hangs on the cross. Jesus bears divine wrath for our salvation.

And what’s key in this is that in order to satisfy God’s wrath fully, Jesus had to die. And there’s a common refrain in this text that reminds us of this. After he carries the cross beam to the place where he’d be crucified in verses 26-31 (the details of which we’ll look at shortly), we’re told in very simple, short, straightforward language that Jesus was crucified. Luke writes, “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.” That’s it. As far as the details of crucifixion, we’re simply told, “There they crucified him.” But what comes up again and again is the note that Jesus was mocked. He’s mocked by the rulers, by the soldiers, and even by one of the criminals who was being crucified alongside of him. But as diverse as the group was who mocked him, their mockery was surprisingly similar. First, Luke tells us, “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!’ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’” (vv. 35-37). And then we read in verse 39, “One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!’”

Without exception, those mocking him told him to save himself. And the reason they saw this as fitting mockery is because they assumed that if someone *could* save himself from crucifixion, then he obviously *would*. That’s why the mocking always fits the pattern of “Let him save himself . . . if he is the Christ,” or “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself,” or “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself.” The obviously assumption in each is that if you’re the Christ, then you obviously have the power to save yourself and would act on it. After all, the Messiah is by

definition a winner, not a loser.² You live and conquer, you don't die, especially in such a shameful way. To them, his death testified to the certain reality that he obviously isn't God's promised King.

But he—with all the ability to keep any soldier from nailing his hands and feet to the cross or to keep anyone from placing a crown of thorns on his head—willingly died. And it was a decision he'd already made in the garden as he'd said, "Not my will but yours be done." He died in order to satisfy the wrath of God toward those who would believe in him so that we might be saved. In other words, there was no way that he could save himself *and* save us. And so he decided to lay down his life so that we (who deserve death) might be saved and live without bearing the wrath and condemnation that we deserved. He is the suffering savior. Second, he is our pioneering high priest.

Jesus is our pioneering high priest

The reason I say "pioneering" high priest is because Jesus is the one who goes in behind the curtain of the temple and opens up free and fully access to God for us. Let me show you what I mean. Luke tells us an interesting detail in verses 44-45. He writes, "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. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two."

This curtain that Luke writes about was the curtain that separated the Holy Place in the temple from the Most Holy Place. The Most Holy Place was an area of the temple where God was pleased to manifest his glory. It was there that the ark of the covenant—which represented God's presence—dwelt. And, therefore, it was not a place where Israelites could go. In fact, the only way that they would have access before God was through a representative, the high priest. And even he could only enter through that curtain one day a year, on the day of atonement.

On the day of atonement, the high priest would enter through this curtain wearing special linen garments and offering sacrifices for himself and the people. But more key than the specifics of what the high priest would do on this day is the reality that the people did not have access to God's presence except through the representative that was their high priest on one day a year.

Therefore, there is significance to that moment when Jesus is on the cross, about to die, and that curtain that separated the Most Holy Place—the presence of God—from all else, was torn from top to bottom. It was spectacular in nature. That curtain was quite thick and was over ninety feet high at its top. There was no way any man could tear this curtain from top to bottom. This was the work of God. But more spectacular than its tearing is what that symbolized. It symbolized the end of the temple itself. It was no longer the meeting place between God and man. The early church would continue to assemble there to meet and teach others, but from this moment God was announcing that the temple was no longer the central place where he

² David Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 923.

would meet with his people. And the Lord was showing that you and I have free and open access to God whenever we want. This is how the author of Hebrews takes it as he writes in Hebrews 10:19-22, “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, without hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

With Christ’s death, we have a high priest who has gone in and opened the way for us to have free and open access to our God. Any time we want we can draw near to him in prayer, with full assurance, through our high priest who intercedes for us continually (And as a side note, this is why we don’t call pastors, or any other office in the church, priests. We have one high priest, one mediator between God and man, and we are a kingdom of priests in that we all have access to God’s presence. But none of us should be seen as a priest in contrast to one another.). So, Jesus’ death means that we have free and open access to God. He is our pioneering high priest. Third, he is the forgiving God.

Jesus is the forgiving God

The theme of forgiveness is set against the backdrop of coming judgment. First, we’re reminded of the judgment that would come on Jerusalem in a few decades, which is a picture of the judgment we all deserve. In verses 26-31 Luke mentions briefly that as Jesus was carrying the cross, they seized Simon of Cyrene to help him carry it, but then he focuses on a multitude of women who were following Jesus and mourning and lamenting for him.

This is an appropriate response for these women to see Jesus and mourn in light of all that he was suffering, but interestingly Jesus puts the focus on them, saying to them, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and your children. 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!’ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us,’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry” (vv. 28-31).

What Jesus is saying is that these women shouldn’t weep for him but for all of those in Jerusalem who would be there when the Romans laid siege to the city and began to starve them out. In those days, situations that seemed like a curse—being barren, not having a nursing infant—would seem like a blessing because there wouldn’t be the burden of trying to feed that child in the midst of these harsh conditions. It would be so dire that Jesus says that what is happening to him physically would seem mild in comparison to the judgment they would inflict them. After all, if they’d do this to Jesus (the green wood, one undeserving of death), what would they do to those who actually rebelled and are sinners (the dry wood)? And so we’re reminded of the coming judgment that would be poured out on Jerusalem and that was a picture of the judgment we all deserve. But against that backdrop we see Jesus’ mercy and forgiveness, even as he hangs on a cross, dying.

Luke tell us first of all that from the cross Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (v. 34), reflecting his heart of mercy, even toward those who are against him. Then, we’re told that as one criminal mocks him, the other rebukes 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.” And then added, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,” to which Jesus responded, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” (vv. 40-43).

Now, in one sense, this is perhaps strange and unfamiliar to us. Here’s a guy who is converted in the very final hours of his life. That is no doubt somewhat rare. But on the other hand, if we look closely, this is a picture of what conversion looks like and a picture of the mercy we can expect from our God as we cry out to him. First, the thief confesses his own guilt. He notes that he’s done something worthy of being condemned to death, and that it is what is due him. That’s the starting point in conversion. You must acknowledge that you’re a sinner, justly condemned. Then, he confesses that Jesus is both righteous and the king. He declares that Jesus is suffering unjustly because he’s done nothing wrong, before asking Jesus to remember him in his kingdom—which is his acknowledgment that Jesus is king. This too is necessary in conversion. We must believe that Jesus is the one who the Bible says he is. And finally, this man believes that there is life after death and believes Jesus can save him. That’s why he asks him to remember him, even though he knows he’s about to die. And sure enough, Jesus saves him, telling him that this very day this man would be with Jesus in paradise. This too is necessary for conversion, as we must believe that Jesus is able and willing to save us if we cry out to him in faith. And indeed, Jesus shows mercy.

Now, the reality is that anyone can respond this way to Jesus. If someone says, “But I’ve sinned much or in grotesque ways,” that’s actually the first step in conversion, acknowledging our sin and guilt, just as the thief on the cross did. You must simply believe that Jesus, the righteous, crucified, and risen king is able to save you and will show you mercy. So, trust in him. He is God the Son, the forgiving God. And finally we see that Jesus is the conquering king.

Jesus is the conquering king

Now, I’ll admit, this story doesn’t read like a conquering king. After darkness covered the land and the temple curtain was torn, Luke tells us, “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” (v. 46). Luke does remind us that the centurion once more bears witness to Jesus’ righteousness, declaring he’s innocent. And we see that the crowds may have felt some shame and guilt as they went home beating their breasts. But I’ll admit, if I were to tell a young child a bedtime story about the conquering king, it wouldn’t end with him being executed in a terrible fashion and then the words, “And he breathed his last.” So, why do I say that the cross shows us that Jesus is the conquering king?

Well, first, we're reminded that he is God's promised king even on the cross. He's continually mocked by others about being the Christ of God and the king of the Jews. And though they're mocking, what they're saying is true. Even the inscription over him on the cross according to verse 38 was, "This is the King of the Jews."

Certainly Pilate put that sign there to mock Jesus, but perhaps more clearly, to mock the Jews. He was no doubt bitter that they'd twisted his arm to get to this point, and the Jews didn't like this sign. They even asked that he'd change it to something like, "He *said*, 'I am the King of the Jews.'" But Pilate refused. And what he wrote was and is true. Jesus is king.

But why say *conquering* king? It is because Jesus' suffering and death is seen as victory in the Scripture? In Hebrews 2:14 we're told, "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil." The devil didn't want Jesus to go to the cross. That's why he offered him all the kingdoms of the world prior to the cross. He was saying to Jesus, "Get what is yours without going down the path of suffering." But the road to the crown was through the cross. The path of suffering was Satan's defeat and Jesus' victory.

And this affects us in two ways. First, we're reminded that his death is our victory as well. When Paul gives instructions for the Lord's Supper, he tells us that "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26), and that proclamation at the Lord's table isn't a proclamation of defeat but of victory. We have forgiveness of sins and eternal life because Jesus was obedient to the point of death.

And it also affects us in that it shows us *our* path to victory. I said that Jesus is the conquering king, but he's not the only one who conquers, so do all who trust in him. The book of Revelation is an unveiling. That's what the title of the book means. It pulls back the curtain and shows us the devil's schemes against the church. He persecutes us through the state and rulers (seen in the beast). He deceives and lies to us in all sorts of ways (seen in the false prophets). He lures us to idolatry and sexual immorality in the culture (seen in the harlot). But the curtain is also pulled back in how we conquer. In Revelation 12:11, we read that in believers' war against the enemy, "They have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death."

Brothers and sisters, we are not above our master. His path to conquering was by being obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. And he has told us that we will take up our crosses as well. We will face persecution as well. We will face the onslaught of evil powers. But we will conquer, if we love not our lives even unto death. Let us obey, bear witness to our Christ in this hostile world, and love not our lives more than we love him. And, like him, though we die, we will live. May we remember why we love him now—because he first loved us—as we come to the table. Amen.