

“Father, Forgive Them” (Luke 23:26–43)

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For some people, this is a very tense time. To put it mildly, some people are freaking out. We may feel like we’re under pressure. We all have experienced other times of stress, times when we feel like we’re being squeezed. When we’re under pressure, what comes out of us? What comes out of you when you are put in the vise grips of life? I imagine that there are times when you’ve been under pressure and something ugly has come out of you. I can imagine that because it’s true of me. When I’ve been in stressful situations, some ugly things have poured out of me.

It’s during those moments that our true selves are revealed. So, what comes out of you when you’re stressed out and under pressure? What does that reveal about you?

Now let us think about what comes out of the greatest man who has ever lived, Jesus of Nazareth, when he was under tremendous stress. This morning, we’ll see what comes out of him when he is pressured in ways that you and I will never be. When he has been betrayed, rejected, abandoned, mocked, tortured, and put to death, what comes out of him? And how do people respond to Jesus in this situation? Those are the questions we’ll consider as we continue our study of the Gospel of Luke this morning.

We’ll be looking at Luke 23:26–43. I would encourage you to look at the text if you can. You can find it easily through a Google search, or by visiting www.esv.org/luke+23.

To give us some quick context: this is the moment when Jesus is about to die. Jesus isn’t just a man, he’s the God-man, the Son of God who has existed forever, and who took on a human nature over two thousand years ago. He has spent two or three years teaching and performing miracles. In this last week of his pre-crucifixion life, he was in Jerusalem for the time of the Passover. A conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day increased throughout the week. These religious leaders did not believe that Jesus is the Son of God, or the Christ (or Messiah), which is a reference to an anointed king, a descendant of King David, who would come and reign over Israel forever, defeating their enemies and bringing about perfect justice and peace. The religious leaders were jealous of Jesus, they wanted to maintain the status quo and their power, and they simply didn’t believe him. So, they arranged for Jesus to die. They told the Roman leader, Pontius Pilate, that Jesus was a threat to the Roman Empire. Pilate didn’t

believe that Jesus had done anything to deserve death, but because the mob demanded that Jesus die, Pilate gave in to their demands.

And now we come to Jesus' crucifixion. Let's begin by reading Luke 23:26–31:

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. 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?"¹

Jesus was put on trial inside the walled city of Jerusalem. Law required that crucifixion take place outside the city. It was custom to have the condemned carry the cross beam to the place of crucifixion. But Jesus is probably too exhausted to carry his own cross. He has been awake for twenty-four hours. He probably hasn't had anything to eat or drink in about twelve hours. He has been beaten and flogged, so that he probably has already lost a significant amount of blood.

So, the cross is given to a man named Simon, from Cyrene, which was in northern African, in what is now Libya. This man was probably in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. I don't want to read too much into his carrying the cross, but perhaps this is an echo of Jesus' earlier teaching, that all who want to be part of God's kingdom must be willing to deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Jesus (Luke 9:23). To have a right relationship with God, we must be willing to change, to deny our natural desires, to be willing to suffer along with Jesus.

As Jesus is making his way to the place where he will be crucified, some people mourn and lament for him. Jesus turns to the women and says that they shouldn't weep for him. Instead, they should weep for themselves and their children. That's strange, isn't it? Jesus has already been tortured, and he is about to die, and yet he says that they shouldn't be sad for him, but for themselves? Why? Because a time of suffering will come upon them. Jesus already taught that in the future, great suffering would occur in Jerusalem. Roughly forty years later, the Jewish people would rebel against the Roman Empire. Rome would respond by besieging the city, surrounding

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

it, attacking it, and destroying it. The suffering would be great. Many Jewish people would die. This destruction was God's judgment against Jerusalem for rejecting Jesus. Yet even though Jesus knows that God's judgments are just, he is sorrowful about them. And he warns these women. If God's judgment falls upon him, the only truly innocent person who has ever lived, what will happen to those who have rebelled against God?

The fact that Jesus is concerned more about these women and their future grief than his own suffering brings me to my first point. In all that is happening, Jesus is not primarily concerned with what is happening to him. He is concerned about others. This is what a perfect person looks like. First, that person is primarily concerned about God, because God is the greatest being there is. Second, that person loves others and cares for their welfare. Jesus puts us to shame in both ways. When we are doing well, we often don't look to the needs of others first. But when we're suffering, that's the time we usually turn inward. But Jesus doesn't do that. He looks outward. If you want to suffer well, do what Jesus does. But the fact that we don't look outward when we suffer is proof that we're not perfect. It's proof that we need someone like Jesus.

Let's move on now and read verses 32–38:

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."

Jesus is not crucified alone. There are two others with him. Luke says they're criminals, but it's wrong to call them thieves. Crucifixion was reserved for enemies of the state. It's more likely that they were insurrectionists of some kind. We might call them terrorists today. At any rate, they arrive at the place of crucifixion, called "The Skull." In Aramaic, it is called Golgotha, which means skull. Sometimes, we use the word "Calvary," which is a good example of Christianese, a language that we Christians understand but others may not. Calvary is an anglicized version of a Latin word that means "skull." It was probably called that because it was

a bit of land that looked like a skull. It was there, outside that city walls, in view of passersby, that Jesus and these two criminals are executed.

Crucifixion involved attaching the condemned to a cross beam, either by rope or by nails. Jesus was nailed to the cross. At the least, nails would be driven through his wrists, and perhaps also his feet. The Gospels don't get into the gory details, however. Crucifixion was a word that wasn't used in polite society, because crucifixion was so gruesome. It's enough to know that Jesus endured a terrible death.

And as he's hanging on that cross, left to die a slow, agonizing, literally excruciating death, what does he do? What does he say? What comes out of him in that moment of pressure and pain? He says, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." This is amazing. Jesus prays to God the Father that these people who are putting him to death would be forgiven. Now, they should have known what they were doing. They should have known who Jesus is. But because of their unbelief, they thought they were putting a blasphemer to death. They were wrong. They were doing something tremendously evil. Yet Jesus wants them to be forgiven.

Now, I don't think Jesus expects that they will be forgiven without their realizing what they have done. To have forgiveness, or at least to have forgiveness and reconciliation, there must be confession on the part of those who have done wrong. There must be remorse. There must be a desire to change and repentance. We don't know how many people involved in Jesus' death later repented and sought God's forgiveness. But the important thing is to see that Jesus has a heart of forgiveness. He doesn't want to hold their sin against them. He wants them to be reconciled to God.

The fact that these people have stripped Jesus and are casting lots for his clothes, and the fact these people are mocking Jesus, even after he has prayed for their forgiveness, highlights how unworthy they are to receive God's forgiveness. But we're not much different. Sure, we haven't mocked the Son of God to his face, but we have often ignored him, acting as if he doesn't exist, or acting as if he's not King. No one is worthy to receive God's forgiveness. That's why his forgiveness is an act of grace. It's a gift. And Jesus seeks that gift for others.

I want to point out two other things before we move on. One, what happens here fulfills a prophetic psalm. Psalm 22 is one of many Psalms written by David. It begins with the famous line, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Both Matthew and Mark report that Jesus

cried out those words while he was on the cross. Psalm 22 also contains other words fulfilled by Jesus. Here are verses 6–8:

- ⁶ But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by mankind and despised by the people.
⁷ All who see me mock me;
they make mouths at me; they wag their heads;
⁸ “He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him;
let him rescue him, for he delights in him!”

And then look at verses 14–18:

- ¹⁴ I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;
¹⁵ my strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.

¹⁶ For dogs encompass me;
a company of evildoers encircles me;
they have pierced my hands and feet—
¹⁷ I can count all my bones—
they stare and gloat over me;
¹⁸ they divide my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots.

These words illustrate the kind of pain and suffering that Jesus endured. He was surrounded by evildoers, who gloated over him and mocked him. “He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him.” Jesus must have looked like a joke to those who mocked him. What kind of king is this, who is crucified? How can this man be the Son of God if he’s dying, and dying in such a shameful way?

Jesus could have saved himself. He could have come down from the cross. He could have accessed the divine power that was always at his command. He could have summoned legions of angels to crush his enemies. But he didn’t do that. He laid down his life for his enemies. Why? If Jesus saved himself, he couldn’t save others. Jesus came to earth not only to live the perfect life, but also to die in place of sinners. He came to take away the death penalty that we deserve. He came to receive God’s wrath, God’s just penalty against sin. This was God’s plan. It was the Son of God’s plan. Jesus can’t save himself and save others. So, he endures suffering in order that

others can be forgiven. What comes out of Jesus in his suffering? Forgiveness and sacrifice. He focuses on God the Father and on those who will be reconciled to God through his selfless act of love.

Let's move on to the last section of today's passage. Here are verses 39–43:

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."

When the people who were killing Jesus said, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" they were mocking Jesus. They thought it was a joke. But one of the criminals who is being crucified alongside Jesus picks up this language. Luke says he "railed" against Jesus, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" He must have been desperate for a rescue.

But the other criminal rebukes him. It's as if he's saying, "Don't you realize what's happening here? We're both guilty. We deserve condemnation. But this man is righteous. He's done nothing wrong. If you realized who we are and who this man is, you wouldn't talk to him that way. If you feared God, you wouldn't talk to this man that way."

This is something of a confession. This second criminal realizes he's guilty. He makes no excuses. He doesn't expect to be rescued from the punishment that he deserves. So, it's a confession of his sin. But it also seems to be a confession of faith. Perhaps he doesn't realize exactly who Jesus is. But he knows that Jesus is innocent. And he also knows that Jesus has the power to bring him into God's kingdom. He realizes that Jesus is a king. Perhaps he realizes Jesus is the King of kings. That's why he says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

How did this criminal know this about Jesus? Perhaps he heard about Jesus before this day. Jesus had become well known. But Matthew, in his Gospel, says that those who were crucified "reviled" Jesus (Matt. 27:44). Matthew uses the plural to indicate that both men reviled Jesus. So, what could move this one criminal from disdain to having faith in him? It must have been seeing how Jesus suffered, seeing that he didn't hate those who hated him. He

saw that Jesus didn't curse those who cursed him. Instead, he asked for their forgiveness. What kind of man would do that? Perhaps, this criminal must have thought, Jesus' claims are true.

If the people who killed Jesus, who mocked him, provide a negative example of how to respond to Jesus, this criminal provides a positive example. He knows he's guilty and he knows Jesus is his only hope. And in response, Jesus says, "Today, you will be with me in paradise."

Paradise is a word that comes from the Persian language. It refers to an idyllic garden. Paradise is where God put the first human beings, Adam and Eve. When they rejected God, he removed them from paradise. And ever since, we have lived in a world marked by suffering and death. That's why we have things like viruses that kill people. It's because of the first sin, and also because we continue to sin—all of us. Ever since mankind was kicked out of paradise, we have tried to get back in. We also desperately want to get back to the garden, to be with God, because that's our real home. That's what we were made for. We can't find paradise in money or politics, in romantic relationships or careers, in convenience and entertainment. Paradise only comes with having a right relationship with God.

The one way back to paradise is Jesus. He is the only road that leads back to God. And to make it possible for rebels, enemies of God, to come back to the garden, someone must take their sin away from them. God is a perfect judge who must punish evil. He can't let the crimes of our failure to love him and to love others go unpunished. If we received what we deserved, we would be like this criminal, condemned. But Jesus came to save his people from their sin. He seeks forgiveness. So, though he is perfectly righteous, he lays down his life, allowing himself to be arrested, tortured, and killed, so that we can go free. Jesus was numbered with the transgressors, and he takes away their sin.

In dying among criminals, Jesus fulfills another prophecy from the Old Testament. This is what Isaiah 53:11–12 says:

- ¹¹ 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.
- ¹² 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.

The Righteous One makes others righteous. He bears their iniquities, their sins.

But Jesus doesn't do this for everyone. He makes "many to be accounted righteous"—not all. He "bore the sin of many"—not all. He only takes away the sins of those who come to him in faith, those who realize who he is and who realize that he is their only hope.

What do we do with this passage? What does it have to do with us? Let us think of what we have already seen.

I want to speak first to Christians. Christians, we must look first to God and then the needs of others. We must love God and we must love others, just as Jesus did. Jesus is more than an example, but he's not less than an example. We can follow him by caring more for what God wants of us than what we want for ourselves. We can follow Jesus by looking first to the needs of others instead of being so concerned about our own needs. Even in our suffering, we must not forget the needs of others.

In this time, there are people around us who have needs. Most of those needs will probably be very practical. People will need help getting groceries and other supplies. Many people will need financial help. Over three million people filed for unemployment just last week. We should check in on our families, friends, neighbors, and coworkers to see how they're doing. We should be prepared to help as we are able.

One way to help is to give to our benevolence fund, also known as the deacons' fund. That money is used to help people in need. If you want to give to that fund, you can simply mail a check to the church and put "benevolence" or "deacons' fund" on the memo line. But you don't need to go through the church to help others.

The greatest need that we all have is to be reconciled to God. And to do that, we need to know Jesus. So, Christians, use this time to help other people know about Jesus. Tell them what you believe. Share with them this video, or other resources we have online. Give them a book to read, or even a Bible.

Christians, we should also seek to forgive as we have been forgiven by God. We should never curse our enemies or respond to hate with hate. It's not just Jesus who asked for the forgiveness of his enemies. The first Christian martyr, Stephen, did the same. As he was being stoned to death, he said, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). We should have that same gracious, forgiving spirit.

Now, to those who are not yet Christians: In this passage, we see two different ways to respond to Jesus. You can respond by laughing off the idea that God can become man and die in your place to take away your sins. Most of you won't mock Jesus or the Christian faith, though of course there are some people who do that. You're more likely to be apathetic or indifferent, to shrug your shoulders and say, "That's a nice story, but I don't believe it." But that's just another way to reject Jesus. Jesus is not someone you can shrug your shoulders at. He's either God incarnate, or this is all a lie. If he's the Son of God, then he demands a response like the one the criminal gave him, a confession of our sin and a humble request for help. If he's not the Son of God, if this is all a myth, then you can feel free to reject Jesus, Christianity, and the Bible.

But in order to reject Jesus, you must first know about him. And most people have never taken the time to think deeply about the claims of Christ and of Christianity. I encourage you to do that today. You'll find a lot of resources on our website that will help you. You can listen to other sermons on the Gospel of Luke² or you can check out a series of messages I gave about Jesus a few years ago.³ Or you can simply read the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Learn about why the Bible is historically accurate. Consider the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. If you want to know more, you can personally contact me. You can find my contact information on our website or send a private message through our Facebook page.

Last week I said that one of the things that prevents people coming to Jesus is that we have an authority problem. We don't want a king to reign over us. We don't want someone telling us what to do, especially when that involves making hard changes. Another reason that keeps people from coming to Jesus is having to take a hard look at ourselves and see that we're guilty of rejecting God, that we've done wrong. That rejection of authority and that failure to confess our wrongdoing both stem from pride. But pride is foolish. We don't have the power to fix ourselves or to fix this broken world. The coronavirus is proof of that. And even if a foolproof vaccine is developed very quickly, something else will occur that will kill us. We will all die. And before we die, so many other things beyond our control will happen to us. And we'll do so many things we regret doing. We're not in control, and we are all guilty.

The good news is that there is one who is in perfect control, who desires the forgiveness of sinners. Jesus welcomes such people into his kingdom. But we must realize we can't force our

² <https://wbcommunity.org/luke>.

³ <https://wbcommunity.org/jesus>

way or earn our way into God's kingdom. The criminal on the cross realized there was nothing he could do to earn God's favor. He simply asked Jesus for help. That's all that you need to do. Admit you're broken, and that you haven't loved God or others the way that you should. Ask Jesus for forgiveness and help. All your sins can be erased. You can be forgiven of everything you've ever done wrong. And you can have the promise of living in paradise with God. You can have that promise today if you turn to Jesus in faith.