

“Father, into Your Hands I Commit My Spirit!” (Luke 23:44–56)

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It’s interesting to see how people react to this pandemic we find ourselves in. Some people don’t take it very seriously. There were stories of college students on spring break who weren’t going to let a virus stop them from their vacations. And some of them became sick.¹ It’s not surprising that some young people wouldn’t think much about their own mortality and the mortality of others. On the other end of the spectrum, some people are very afraid. Some people are afraid of getting sick, or they’re afraid of their loved ones getting sick. I think more of us are afraid that this situation will cause other problems. We think we’ll lose our jobs, run out of money, or run out of food and basic household supplies. Why do people hoard? Because, at the end of the day, most people fear death.

This pandemic only highlights what was and has always been a reality: We will all die. That’s a hard truth. But I think it’s a good thing to think about death, for the very reason that we will all die. In one of the most fascinating books of the Bible, Ecclesiastes, we read these words:

It is better to go to the house of mourning
than to go to the house of feasting,
for this is the end of all mankind,
and the living will lay it to heart (Eccl. 7:2).²

Death is a great teacher. Since we’re all going to die, we should think more carefully about what matters most in life.

One of my favorite philosophers, Blaise Pascal, thought deeply about the meaning of life. He uses this illustration to shock us to think about the meaning of our lives:

Imagine a number of men in chains, all under the sentence of death, some of whom are each day butchered in the sight of the others; those remaining see their own condition in that of their fellows, and looking at each other with grief and despair await their turn. This is an image of the human condition.³

¹ David Montgomery and Manny Ramirez, “44 Texas Students Have Coronavirus After Spring Break Trip,” *New York Times*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/01/us/coronavirus-texas-austin-spring-break-cabo.html>.

² All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

³ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* 434/199, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 1995), 137.

That's a cheery thought, isn't it? We're all sentenced to die, we see other people much like us who receive that sentence, and we know our time is coming.

Since that is the case, it's foolish not to think deeply and carefully about death. If death is a great teacher, what should it teach us? There's a great book called *Remember Death*, written by Matthew McCullough, that came out a couple of years ago. In that book, McCullough writes these words: "Death makes a statement about who we are: we are not too important to die. We will die, like all those who've gone before us, and the world will keep on moving just as it always has. No one is indispensable. It's a harsh, even terrifying statement."⁴ Let those words sink in a bit: "we are not too important to die."

But those are not the last words that McCullough writes. He also writes this: "If death tells us we're not too important to die, the gospel tells us we're so important that Christ died for us."⁵ The word "gospel" literally means "good news." We're looking for good news these days. And the best news is that God would send his Son to die in place of his enemies.

If that doesn't make sense to you, I urge you to keep listening. It's ironic to think that anyone's death could be good news. But that's what Christians have always believed. At the heart of the Christian faith stands Jesus. And the central act of Jesus is to sacrifice himself for his people, which is what we'll talk about today. The other act that is central to what Jesus has done is to rise from the grave in a body that can never die again. We'll talk about that next week, on Resurrection Sunday, better known as Easter.

Today, we're going to continue to study the Gospel of Luke. We're going to look at Luke 23:44–56. I invite you to turn there in your Bibles, or your Bible apps. You can find the passage easily enough with a Google search, too. If you don't have a Bible, would you let us know? You can send a private message or contact us through our website. We'll mail a Bible to you to make sure that you have your own copy.

Let's start by reading Luke 23:44–49:

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. ⁴⁷ Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent!" ⁴⁸ And all the crowds that had assembled for this

⁴ Matthew McCullough, *Remember Death: The Surprising Path to Living Hope* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 28.

⁵ *Ibid.*

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.

Over the past two months, as we have studied the closing chapters of Luke, we have seen that Jesus was betrayed by one of his own disciples, arrested by Jewish leaders who didn't believe that he was the Christ, the anointed King of Israel, or the Son of God, that he was put on trial for making himself out to be those things, and that he was sentenced to death by Pontius Pilate in order to satisfying a bloodthirsty mob. Last week, we saw that Jesus was crucified, nailed to a cross as if he were a threat to the Roman Empire.

Jesus was crucified at the third hour (Mark 15:25), which would be about 9 a.m., three hours after sunrise. At the sixth hour, at about noon, darkness appeared until the ninth hour, 3 p.m. Obviously, this is an unusual event. Why is darkness appearing in the middle of the day?

This darkness has everything to do with how we understand the meaning of Jesus' death. Light and darkness have deeper meanings in the Bible. Throughout the Bible, we're told that the human condition is one of darkness. Think about what light does. It shows us what is real. Without light, we couldn't see. Light exposes what is truly there. Light also gives life. Without any light from the sun, life on earth would end rather quickly. The Bible says that our real condition is that we're separated from God. We have broken a relationship with God, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. That relationship is broken by our failure to love him, honor him, and obey him. Instead of coming into the light, into a true relationship with God, we hide from him in the darkness (John 3:19–20). It is our running away from God, our hiding in darkness, that is ultimately responsible for what is broken in the world. That is why we die. We run from the source of light and life.

But Jesus is the light of the world (John 8:12). Earlier in Luke's Gospel, we're told that Jesus came to bring light to those who were in darkness (Luke 1:79). God the Father sent God the Son to reveal what is true, and to shine a light on the path back to God. In fact, Jesus is not only the light, but he is also the way to God (John 14:6). It was appropriate that when Jesus was born, in the middle of the dark night, the sky was filled with angels and glory, a brilliant light (Luke 2:8–14).

But now it becomes dark in the middle of the day. Why does this happen?

The answer is that this darkness is a sign of judgment. If you're familiar with the story of the Bible, you know that Israel was rescued while they were slaves in Egypt during the time of

Moses. God delivered Israel out of Egypt through a series of plagues. The ninth plague was darkness that covered the land for three days (Exod. 10:21–29). This darkness was a sign that judgment was coming. And, indeed, the next plague was the death of all the firstborn in the land (Exod. 11:1–10). So, this darkness that lasted for three hours as Jesus was hanging on the cross was a sign that God was judging sin, rebellion against him.

God, as the perfect judge, must punish wrongdoing. He must punish crimes. And this is a loving thing to do because sin is destructive. A loving person will want to crush that which destroys. God has promised that in the end, he will do that.

In fact, that judgment against sin was often foretold by the prophets of the Old Testament. They referred to a “Day of the Lord,” a day of salvation for God’s people and a day of destruction for those who rebelled against him. These prophets spoke of what would happen when God judges sin, and this often involved darkness. Here are a few passages. This is Isaiah 13:9–11:

- ⁹ Behold, the day of the LORD comes,
cruel, with wrath and fierce anger,
to make the land a desolation
and to destroy its sinners from it.
- ¹⁰ For the stars of the heavens and their constellations
will not give their light;
the sun will be dark at its rising,
and the moon will not shed its light.
- ¹¹ I will punish the world for its evil,
and the wicked for their iniquity;
I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant,
and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless.

And here is another word from God about the Day of the Lord. This is 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.

Again, here is another word about this day of judgment. Here is Zephaniah 1:14–16:

- ¹⁴ The great day of the LORD is near,
near and hastening fast;
the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter;
the mighty man cries aloud there.
- ¹⁵ A day of wrath is that day,
a day of distress and anguish,

a day of ruin and devastation,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness,
¹⁶ a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
against the fortified cities
and against the lofty battlements.

So, what is happening here in Jerusalem, when the sky turns dark in the middle of the day as Jesus is dying? It is a sign that God is judging sin. But, as we saw two weeks ago, and as we'll see again today, Jesus is completely innocent. He never did anything wrong. He never sinned. So why is God judging him?

Remember those words I shared earlier: "If death tells us we're not too important to die, the gospel tells us we're so important that Christ died for us." Jesus was dying in our place. He was enduring the judgment of God that we deserve. All rebellion against God and all the destruction that comes with failing to love him and love others, failing to live life on the Creator's terms, will be judged. But God did something amazing. He sent his Son, who came willingly, to bear the penalty that we deserve. Jesus was enduring the Day of the Lord on the cross. He was dying to pay the penalty for sin, a penalty that all of us should face.

There's another sign that Jesus was atoning for the sin of his people. We're told that the curtain of the temple was torn in two. The temple was where God dwelled among his people. It was a place of worship, where people taught God's word and prayed. It was also a place of sacrifice. God told Israel to sacrifice animals, symbolically transferring their guilt to animals who would die in their place. Now, an animal can't bear the penalty for a human. So, these sacrifices did not actually satisfy justice. But God told the Israelites to do this, and it was a sign that sin deserves to be killed. It also was a sign that the death penalty could be taken by another.

When Jesus died, he fulfilled the sacrificial system of the Old Testament. His death made the temple obsolete. (The book of Hebrews makes this abundantly clear.)

In the Old Testament, for people to approach God, they had to go to the temple. They had to go through priests. But now, to go to God, we only need to go to Jesus. So, the curtain's tearing was a sign that there is now open access to God. You don't have to go to a special building. You don't have to go to a priest. You have direct access to God through Jesus. In fact, Christianity says that all Christians are part of God's temple. The Spirit of God does not dwell in some manmade building that you must visit. The Holy Spirit dwells in God's people. And the Bible says that all Christians are royal priests. Jesus is our High Priest, and we must go to him to

get to God, to be reconciled to God. This doesn't mean that there is no longer any kind of structured religion. Jesus gave the church pastors to lead, teach, and protect his people (Eph.4:11ff). And his people do often meet in buildings. But none of these things are necessary to know God and have a right relationship with him. All you need is Jesus.

Though Jesus seems to be passive in his dying on the cross, he is in control. He lays down his life. He yields his life to God the Father. He continues to trust in the Father, even as he's enduring hell on earth. When he says, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," he's quoting something from the Old Testament. He's quoting a part of Psalm 31. This is what Psalm 31:1-8 says:

- 1 In you, O LORD, do I take refuge;
let me never be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me!
- 2 Incline your ear to me;
rescue me speedily!
Be a rock of refuge for me,
a strong fortress to save me!
- 3 For you are my rock and my fortress;
and for your name's sake you lead me and guide me;
- 4 you take me out of the net they have hidden for me,
for you are my refuge.
- 5 Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.
- 6 I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols,
but I trust in the LORD.
- 7 I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love,
because you have seen my affliction;
you have known the distress of my soul,
- 8 and you have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy;
you have set my feet in a broad place.

Even as Jesus is enduring the greatest physical suffering we can imagine, and even as he's enduring greater spiritual and psychological pain that we can ever imagine, he trusts in God. God is his refuge, his help. He knows that God will deliver him. Even as Jesus saves his people, he serves as an example of how to trust God even in our darkest moments.

When Jesus dies, we see another example. We see a positive reaction to Jesus. A Roman soldier, a centurion, a leader of a group of one hundred soldiers, sees Jesus suffer and die, and he comes to this conclusion: "Certainly this man was innocent!" This is the seventh time that

someone claims that Jesus is innocent. Luke makes it clear that Jesus wasn't dying for his own wrongs, crimes, or sins. He was dying for ours. If you want to know why Jesus' innocence is important, go back and listen to my message from two weeks ago.⁶ Jesus fulfilled God's designs for humanity by living the perfect life, and he takes the penalty of sin for all who trust in him, so that his people, those who believe that he is Savior, Lord, and God, those who trust in him and are willing to follow him, are regarded by God as perfectly righteous, and their sins are removed from them, so that they can be forgiven by God and reconciled to him.

We also see other reactions to Jesus. The crowd leaves the site after Jesus died and they lament. And we see women watching Jesus' death. This is important for at least three reasons. One, Jesus had female followers (Luke 8:1–3). While his inner ring of disciples consisted only of men, Jesus loved women and treated them with respect. Sometimes you hear how the Bible is misogynistic or somehow against women. But that's not true at all. It's also important to see that Jesus' faithful followers are willing to follow him to the end. That, too, is an example for us. And, third, it shows that these women witnessed Jesus' death. Jesus truly died. Some people claim he didn't. Islam teaches that Jesus only appeared to die, that either he didn't die or that someone else who looked like him took his place on the cross. But that's not true. These women knew Jesus, they knew what he looked like, and they saw that he actually died.

Now, let's read the rest of today's passage in Luke. Here is Luke 23:50–56:

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.

This passage is important because it talks about Jesus' burial in the tomb. We're now told of a man named Joseph, who was good and righteous. He was a member of the Jewish council that was opposed to Jesus. And he didn't agree with their decision. We don't know if he actively worked against them, or if he silently disagreed. But it's clear that he knew that Jesus did not

⁶ <https://wbcommunity.org/i-find-no-guilt-in-this-man>.

deserve to die. In the other Gospels, we're told that he was a disciple of Jesus (Matt. 27:57; John 19:38).

Joseph wanted to honor Jesus by giving him a proper burial. Jesus would have been buried in a shallow, common grave if Joseph hadn't stepped in. To be thrown into a ditch is dishonoring. It was particularly dishonoring in the view of Jewish people, though we would think the same thing today. Just recently I watched a documentary on the Holocaust, and that documentary showed footage of the emaciated corpses of Jews being pushed by a bulldozer into a ditch. It was a horrific thing to see. Though these people had already died, it was a further offense not to treat their bodies with care.

Joseph, a follower of Jesus, wanted to honor Jesus, to treat his body with respect. After all, the body is no less a creation of God than the soul. So, Joseph asks for Jesus' body. In Mark's Gospel, we're told that Joseph "took courage" to do that. Pontius Pilate, the Roman leader, might have treated Joseph poorly for asking for the body of an enemy of the state. But he doesn't do that. Joseph is allowed to take the body, and he puts it in his own, unused tomb. This is important because we see that Jesus' body had a specific location after he died. He was put in a tomb, one that these women saw, a tomb that would be empty less than forty-eight hours later.

It is also important because it shows that even Jesus' burial fulfills a prophecy of the Old Testament. Isaiah 53:9 says this:

And they made his grave with the wicked
and with a rich man in his death,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Jesus really died. Joseph would be able to see this. Jesus' female followers saw it. They saw exactly where Jesus was entombed. We'll see why this important next week, when we consider Luke 24 and Jesus' resurrection.

Luke also tells us that Jesus that it is now the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, a day of rest. In Jewish law, all work was to be done on six days. The seventh day was for rest and worship. So, Jesus died on the sixth day, when his work was done. He accomplished all the work that is necessary for us to have a right relationship with God. As Jesus says in John's Gospel, "It is finished" (John 19:30). And then, on the seventh day, Jesus rested in the tomb. On the eighth day, or the first day of a new week, Jesus will rise from the grave, to begin a new era.

Now that we have looked at this passage, I'll ask the question that I always ask: why does all of this matter?

It's important to see why Jesus dies. He dies to satisfy God's justice against sin. Since he is innocent, he didn't die for his own sin. So, he must have died for the sins of others. And he did. All who come to Jesus in faith, who are willing to confess their sin, to acknowledge that they are not God, that Jesus is God and the world's only Savior, and who are prepared to follow Jesus like these women and Joseph, are cleared of all their wrongdoing. They are innocent. They are reconciled to God. Our greatest need is to be connected to God, to have a right relationship with Jesus. And Jesus gives us that. He gives us open access to God. We simply need to come to him.

The death of Jesus is also very important to people who fear death. And I think all of us fear death in some way. There's a book in the Bible called Hebrews, which talks about how Jesus is all that we need to be in the right before God. Jesus is greater than angels, prophets, and priests. He is the true temple, the true priest, the true sacrifice for sin. Early in that book, the author of Hebrews says that the Son of God was made to become like us. He became a human being, to live a perfect life and to die in our place. And Hebrews 2:14–15 says this:

¹⁴Since 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, ¹⁵and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

Through his death, Jesus destroyed the work of the devil (also 1 John 3:8). The devil wants to tempt us to sin and then accuse us of our sin. In other words, the devil wants to separate us from God. And we willingly separate ourselves from God when we hide in the darkness. But Jesus came to destroy Satan's work and to bring us back to God. If you have put your trust in Jesus, you have no reason to fear death. You are delivered from the fear of death, which is a form of slavery. And that is so important in this time.

If you're a Christian, you should find the idea of Jesus' death comforting. That's not only true because he died to pay the penalty for your sins. But Jesus knows what it's like to die. Jesus can relate to us. He knows what it's like to die.

You may wonder how it is that the Son of God can die. Well, we should remember that dying isn't ceasing to exist. Death is the dissolution of the body, a separation of body and soul, something that is not God's ultimate plan for us. Christianity says that the body is important,

because God made it. That's why it's important to honor the body, even after death. So, Jesus was separated from his body, but he continued to exist. There's never a moment when the Son of God hasn't existed. But he did take on a human nature over two thousand years ago, and that meant having a human body, one that could die. But even as a man, Jesus never stopped existing. His soul endured and went to paradise, which was opened up by Jesus' death. The curtain is torn, heaven's gate is open, and Jesus invites you to come in.

If you do fear death, trust in Jesus. Jesus has died. He knows what it is like to be mortal. But he came back to life. And Jesus has reported what happens after death. He knows what lies beyond the curtain of death. That's not a frontier that scientists or politicians or journalists can tell you about. Science is important. I would say it's a gift from God. But it has its limits. It cannot tell us what lies beyond the grave. We need someone to report that to us, someone who has died and come back to life, someone who knows everything because he's God. Jesus is that someone.

We'll talk more about the resurrection next week, but I think it's important to say this even now. Jesus once told someone mourning the death of her brother these very important words: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25–26). That is a question for you, too. Do you believe? If not, I urge you to. At the least, learn as much about Jesus and the Bible as you can. I would love to help you do that.