

Luke's Portrait of Calvary

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[0 : 00] Let's turn our minds now together to the passage in Luke that we read in chapter 23 and verses 26 through to 43.

As we've been looking at Luke's great message about Jesus, about his person, his identity, the purpose of his mission, his work, we can compare it in some ways to those kinds of panoramas that you find as aerial photographs that are then put together so as to cover a wide scene.

When you find all of these aerial photographs taken and then put together, you find this great panorama where they're all joined together so that you find the whole complete scene set out before you.

And as you look at this picture that Luke is giving us of Jesus, in a spiritual sense it's something like that. And when you come to these passages about the crucifixion, the death of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus, it's really at the very crux, at the very center, it's the very centerpiece of that panorama of photographs that are given to us if you take the whole gospel to be thought of in that way.

And as you take all of these other photographs that we've seen as we've gone through the gospel, these various pictures, the events, the statements, the way in which Jesus is set before us, and the miracles and the parables and all the other things that are described there, these are all photographs brought together to be part of the complete scene of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

[1 : 48] But the crux of it, the centerpiece of it, is in his death, his resurrection from the dead, these passages here in these chapters.

And if you take that out, if that photograph was missing from the center of the panorama, you might find all of these roads coming towards that center, but you can't make sense of it.

It's this central picture that really locks everything else together and makes sense of everything else. Because without this, the other parts of this message of Luke make little, if any, sense at all.

And while you might admire certain things in it, such as the power of Jesus, the sympathy of Jesus, the compassion of Jesus, the various things that are recorded of his teaching, while you might admire those and find much in that to think about, there is nothing there which saves if you take out the central photograph of his death and resurrection.

That's what all the roads from the other photographs that you find there, that's what all the roads that you see in the other photographs heading towards this central point, that's what they all come to, that's where they all are heading for.

[3 : 11] This is the heart of it all. This is the centerpiece. This is the piece that is of most importance and gives meaning and sense and purpose to everything else.

And as you find in these verses, in these passages, and in the passage we're looking at tonight, Luke is actually conveying the message of who Jesus is, even through what he records of the ridicule and the mocking of those who mocked him at this point in his crucifixion and mockingly taunted him that he was not even able to save himself, so how could he possibly save others?

You see, Jesus is set out for us, the truth about Jesus, part of the method of Luke, is to take even those details and make them speak to us powerfully about who Jesus is and about what his message and mission is about.

Let's look at three things that arise from this passage tonight. First of all, you find in verses 26 to 31, what we can call a solemn prediction, where Jesus speaks to the women particularly, that are part of the crowd, that are following him on the way to Calvary, or the place of the skull, which is also Calvary.

Secondly, verses 32 to 38, you find an emphasis on the mocking rejection that takes place there on the part of the leaders, especially of the Jews, as they actually give their verdict of Jesus and as the soldiers join in with that mocking.

[5 : 04] Thirdly, in verses 39 to 43, we have an account of a wonderful conversion. Because one of the criminals, he's often called the thief, but these two were actually probably more than thieves, because thieves were not normally crucified, you would have to do something more of a crime than to steal something to be crucified.

They were criminals, they were people who had committed serious crimes. And in any case, we find a wonderful conversion taking place, even as these events of the cross and these moments pass.

One of the three criminals is wonderfully converted and is assured by Jesus that before that day is out, he's actually going to be with him in paradise.

A solemn prediction, a mocking rejection, and a wonderful conversion. Look first of all at this solemn prediction.

Because as they led Jesus 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.

[6 : 21] Those who are going to be crucified were required in the conditions of the time to carry either the cross or the piece in the middle or the piece across the center of the cross where their arms would be tied, which their arms would be tied to.

They were required to carry that for themselves at least part of the distance. Now Jesus had been flogged severely. And in that flogging, his physical strength would have drained out of him.

And as he made his way with carrying the cross, that was taken away from him.

And it was laid upon this man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country. Now there's a very interesting reference in Mark to Simon of Cyrene.

In Mark's Gospel, chapter 15 and verse 21, if you turn back to that, you can see that Mark's account of this particular event says they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross.

[7 : 37] And that, while you can't be certain about it, is an intriguing reference. Mark certainly knew the sons of the Simon of Cyrene. And it's conjectured, and it's a very interesting conjecture, and one that's very likely to be the case, that in the life of this man, because after all, he didn't come deliberately to offer himself to take the cross of Jesus.

He hadn't come specifically for this purpose. He was simply making his way out of the country. He was on his way to Jerusalem, perhaps for the Passover, whatever was the reason. He was coming out in from the country to the city.

And they grabbed him, they just took hold of him, they seized him, they picked on him, and gave the cross of Jesus to him to carry. And it would seem to be the case that it changed the life of this man, that this man, Simon of Cyrene, became a Christian, that his sons became Christians, that they were members of the church known to Mark as he wrote the gospel.

And it's interesting too, and again you could make too much of it, but it does actually say here, Luke did say, they laid on him the cross to carry it behind Jesus.

Not in front of Jesus, not beside Jesus, but behind Jesus. And we already saw in the teaching of Luke, how Jesus himself had emphasized that whoever would be his disciple, must take up his cross, and follow him.

[9 : 12] And surely it's not reading too much into it, that Luke is actually making a passing reference to that emphasis on discipleship, because discipleship is taking up the cross.

Not in the literal way in which Simon took up the cross of Jesus, but becoming a follower of Jesus. Entering into what it means to suffer for Jesus. What it means to be ridiculed for Jesus.

What it means to actually be thought of as part of a people that really don't know what they're doing, who follow Christ, who worship Christ, who believe in Christ, who hope to see Christ, and to be with Christ.

What is it to be a disciple? It's to be a follower of Christ, but following Christ means taking up your cross and following him. In other words, it's as we saw then back in our studies in Luke, a putting of self to death, a denying of yourself, a killing of the things which want, where you want to serve yourself and be in charge of your own life.

You don't do that as a disciple. That's what you end doing. That's what you actually put behind you. You take up your cross. You take up a new life. You follow Jesus. You become part of what it means to live the life of the cross in relation to the death that he died.

[10 : 34] Well, in any case, that's what happened to this man. And it really is saying to us that when we ourselves contribute towards Christ and Christ's ministry, we expect to receive benefits from that.

Whatever benefits this man received, and it was true indeed that he became a Christian or else his family became Christians after him because of what happened here and his involvement in this important event of Christ going to Calvary, whenever you contribute to the cause of Christ, you're doing something where you are quite within your rights to believe that God will bless it to you, that you will benefit from it, that God has something for you in store through what you have done in honoring his son, in giving him a place in your life, the central place in your life.

So there's Simon's contribution. And then it moves quickly to the multitude that were following him, and especially the women who were mourning and lamenting for him.

Now, Luke, as we've seen, gives a considerable place to women who were in that generation and in that society very much looked down upon and not allowed to have any sort of main contribution or prominent contribution in spiritual matters.

And that's why you find Luke emphasizing things like the woman who came to anoint Jesus, the beginning where his mother Mary has a great song of praise to God, and all the way through up to this moment.

[12 : 20] And here are a group of women amongst the multitude following who were mourning and lamenting for him. And their mourning and lamenting for him was genuine.

They were emotionally distressed at what was happening. We're not told that they were all believers in Jesus. Most of them probably were, but in any case, they were mourning and lamenting for him and for what they were seeing happening to him.

And then Jesus did a remarkable thing. He turned to them and called them daughters of Jerusalem. In other words, he was seeing them as if you like representing this city of Jerusalem.

As if they were the representatives of that city there and then before him. And he said, daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but for yourselves and for your children.

Jesus is saying, well, he's not saying he didn't value their sympathy or their emotion as something in which they were really genuinely distressed for him and for the sufferings that he was undergoing.

[13 : 36] But what he was saying is, your focus is in the wrong place. Don't have sympathy. Don't weep for me. Weep for yourselves and for your children because the days are coming when this city that you belong to is going to be judged.

It's going to be destroyed. There are implications for my crucifixion by the people of this city. And of course, in AD 70, the Roman authorities flattened the city of Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and engaged in a lot of horrible things as they did so.

Jesus knew that that was coming. Jesus knew that that was related to their rejection of him and especially the way and the manner in which they rejected him.

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, follow on us, and to the hills, cover us.

You see, it's not just in Iraq today or in Syria or whatever where terrible things are done to human beings including to children. It happened in the days that Jesus spoke of here and it happened in days long before this as well.

[14 : 55] Violence and that kind of persecution, that kind of hatred is nothing new. And what Jesus is saying is that's what you should weep for, what's coming on yourselves.

as a city. And there's this mysterious statement for if they do these things when the wood is dry, when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?

What does he mean by that? What does that actually mean? What do these words mean? Well, if you think of wood, if you were to cut down a tree tomorrow that you wanted to have cut down and then you'd try to burn that wood immediately, you'd find it very difficult to set it alight because it's still full of sap.

It won't take to fire very easily. But if you leave it for months and months and you keep it dry and it scabbles up and all the sap goes out of it and then you try and put it on fire, it catches fire very easily.

And what Jesus is saying is if they do these things when the wood is green, that's to say if they're able to do this to me, to the likes of me, to me, the Son of God, what will they do to the people of the city?

[16 : 15] If they're able to do this now to me, the green tree, the green wood, the wood with the sap in it, what will happen when it is dry?

What's going to happen to ordinary people when terrible times come? And Jesus is predicting very solemnly what lies in store for the city of Jerusalem.

And it's very difficult to read that and to realize that they brought it on themselves because of the rejection of Christ. But let's go back just for a moment to this weeping and lamenting this morning and lamenting for him.

This was genuine lamenting. This was indeed a proper emotional outpouring of grief for Jesus, for what they saw happening to Christ.

Christ. And Jesus is really saying, in effect, what I want really to see is not merely your emotion but your repentance, your faith, your commitment to me, your realization of the importance of what's happening.

[17 : 32] because you see, it's possible to be emotionally attached to Jesus and yet not be saved. To have an emotional attachment to the gospel, to the message of the gospel, to have your heart really affected deeply when you read about, when you hear about things such as the sufferings of Christ, the way in which he suffered for his people, as you find described in the likes of these passages, it would be very strange if our heart was not moved.

There's something wrong with us if we can stoically read that and not feel ourselves inclined to weep, inclined to actually join in with these women who are mourning and lamenting for him.

This is the Son of God. This is Christ and his love giving himself to this abuse, giving himself to this death that is now immediately about to happen to him and that he's going to die actively for his people.

There's much more to being saved than simply having an emotional attachment to Jesus. One of the great ministers of the Disruption Church in these days, Robert Murray McChain, who was, as you know, the godly minister of Dundee, and died as a very young man, but nevertheless was even then revered for the quality of his ministry and his life.

And he wrote some hymns where he set out his spiritual experiences, and one of them is that famous hymn called Jehovah Sidkenu. Taking words from the prophecy of Jeremiah, Jehovah, our righteousness, the Lord, our righteousness, which of course is Christ himself.

[19 : 26] And one of the things he sets out in the verses of that hymn is the way in which when he heard the gospel frequently, he wept. When Isaiah described the sufferings of Jesus in Isaiah 53, McChain says the tears came to his eyes.

Like tears from the daughters of Zion, that role. You see, he's talking of this passage here in hymn, like tears from the daughters of Zion, that role.

I wept when the waters went over his soul, yet thought not that my sins had nailed to the tree. Jehovah Sidkenu knows nothing to me.

What is your attachment to Jesus tonight? Do you have something stronger than, something more than, an emotional attachment?

It's good to weep under the gospel. It's good to weep when you read about and hear of the sufferings of Christ. It's good to know tears coming to your eyes and running down your face when you realize the extent to which Jesus suffered, the extent to which he gave himself to these sufferings that led to his death and the sufferings of his death too in itself as we see God willing next time.

[20 : 53] But let's make sure that we have more than an emotion, an emotional attachment to Christ. He's saying to these women effectively, I see your emotion but do you have faith?

Do you have repentance? Do you have that commitment to me that is more than emotional, that is deeper than emotional? Daughters of Jerusalem weep not for me but for yourselves.

And when we weep for Christ when we weep as we hear of his sufferings let's make sure that we accompany it by weeping for ourselves by weeping over our sin by being sorry and hurt over our sins and by realizing that this suffering of Christ is God's provision against our sin our guilt our lostness.

There's Christ's solemn prediction which involves this weeping of these women. Let's secondly look at this mocking rejection because when we come to the crucifixion Luke describes it in very simple terms very brief terms he simply tells us when they came to the place called the skull which from the Latin we find the word Calvary they came to this place and they crucified him and the criminals one on his right hand and one on his left that too is important Jesus is the one in the middle it's interesting and significant that he's the one in the middle and that as he's the one in the middle as we'll see shortly one on one side is saved and the one on the other is not in other words the cross of Jesus itself in its exact location between two others is itself symbolic of the division that the cross makes amongst humanity there are only two sides to the issue one side of Christ or the other and what

Luke is really saying to us as the other gospel writers are as well when you take consideration of this and realize that it's no accident that the cross of Christ is in the middle and is the dividing between the two it is that which divides the other two distinguishes the other two it's the relation to the cross that distinguishes the one from the other where one receives and believes and the other mocks and rejects but it's the cross that's in between and what Luke's message is really saying to us again tonight very pointedly and very clearly is we are not allowed to be neutral there is no neutral ground at Calvary there is just one side of Christ or the other there's the side of the lost and the side of the saved and you tonight as you and I with you as we go through these details as we look at them carefully as we realize that neutrality is not allowed that we're not given that facility of being neutral in regard to this cross as if there was somehow any neutrality spiritually there isn't

[24 : 27] Luke is really projecting his message at us and as the word of God as it now is speaks to us tonight it's saying that we are compelled to choose and make our choice we are compelled to choose the one side or the other to be with the one who came to be saved to be on the right side of Jesus or to be on the other side now you know which side you're on tonight you're well able to assess your life you're well able to see yourself in this picture which side of the cross are you on right now where is your face where is your life how do you relate to Jesus to his cross to his sufferings to his death do you see yourself for sure on the side of the saved or do you see yourself for sure on the side of the lost well if you see yourself on the wrong side of

Jesus move over go to the other side make sure that you have a right relationship with him that is more than emotional that's the one in which you find as he's crucified next to you in the message of the gospel as it were that you look to him and that you say with this criminal lord please remember me save me don't leave me out of it secondly you find Christ's prayer in this part of the passage as they crucified him Jesus said father forgive them for they know not what to do what they do it's remarkable isn't it that Jesus found the time and that he found the inclination and the desire to pray this prayer at this critical moment and that he prayed for these people who were involved actively in crucifying him at this time we understand that this prayer would have covered both the

Roman soldiers and the people of the Jews who were responsible for calling for his crucifixion sometimes we hear the question asked would would every one of these people then have been converted because surely the prayers of Christ were always heard by the father always heard but not always answered in the way that Jesus requested it in gethsemane we saw that his prayer genuinely and sincerely was father remove this cup from me yet nevertheless not my will but thine be done but the cup was not removed the prayer of Christ for the cup to be removed it was not removed whatever you say about this prayer and its effect and I'm sure that many people were converted as a result of this prayer later as you find the gospel story develop as you find some of the soldiers themselves the centurion as he stood by the cross at the end of this whole incident of Christ and as

Christ died certainly he said this was the son of God the women themselves and many of the crowd the day of Pentecost when thousands were converted you could say quite rightly that that can be traced back to the prayer of Christ father forgive them for they know not what to do but whatever you say about the prayer being answered and how it was answered and in whom it was answered the most wonderful thing of all is that he prayed at this moment that he prayed in these circumstances that he prayed for those who were crucifying him that he prayed for all of these people who were abusing him because this is nothing else but the sheer compassion the immeasurable compassion of Jesus Christ this is the heart of the Lord opened up for us in his pity even for those who are his enemies for those who are engaged in putting him to death father forgive them not father condemn them not father put them to death father forgive them if only we realized just how full the heart of

Jesus is tonight with a desire with a yearning that your sins will be blotted out that your guilt will be removed that you will come to a standing of righteousness with himself we can all say in the ignorance of our sinfulness in the darkness of our mind even under the gospel we can say to an extent that we know not what we do when we reject Christ when we join in with the cry of those who sent him away to be crucified and every time we do it when we know our gospel we hear the echo of his prayer coming to accuse us and to smite our conscience father forgive them father forgive them father forgive them for they know not what they do has that not left a mark in yourself tonight even if it hasn't before as you've thought about it over the last few moments as you see the predicament

[30 : 59] Jesus is in as you see his circumstances as you realize the extent of his sufferings the abuse that he is receiving as these words describe it and then out of this turmoil comes this wonderful petition father forgive them and for you as a Christian when you are ridiculed when you are abused when your views are denigrated and trampled underfoot when you meet with the kind of opposition that says surely you don't believe in that rubbish nowadays how do you react how do you respond to such enmity father forgive them they know not what they do few things are as powerful as a Christian man or woman young or old pleading with their enemy so that they be forgiven giving out forgiveness to those who have hated them father forgive them is the beginning of that journey

Christ sets the tone and the example for us and then there is the scoffing of those who are around the cross especially those who are of the leadership of the people the people stood by watching but the ruler scoffed at him saying he saved others he cannot save himself and the soldiers joined in offering him sour wine and saying if you are the king of the Jews save yourself and the inscription said over him this is the king of the Jews well like we said as we saw with chapter 15 at the beginning of that chapter the scribes and the Pharisees ridiculing him said this man receives sinners and eats with them it was spoken of Christ and criticism and yet it is a beautiful truth one of the most beautiful things the bible says about Christ and so it is here all of these things that are spoken in scoffing and in mockery are actually the conveying of the truth about him although they don't realize it and it's true he cannot save himself if he had saved himself there would be no salvation for you and me if he had come down from the cross like they were calling upon him to do we would out hope lie who was going to die the death we deserved who was going to atone for our sin no he couldn't come down from the cross he was there to die the death that needed to be died for his people to be saved he saved others not by coming down from the cross but by going through with it by finishing it by accomplishing it by seeing it through to the end and tonight are you not glad that he didn't come down from that cross are you not glad that he went through with it are you not glad that the very things they were calling upon him to do he chose not to do that he remained on that cross that he saw it through to the end are you not glad that is the kind of ground you have for your hopes for eternity the commitment of Jesus to die so that you and

I could be saved thirdly there is a wonderful conversion we will go over it just briefly one of the criminals who were hand-wailed at him saying are you not the Christ save yourself and us but the other rebuked him saying do you not fear God seeing you are under the same condemnation and we indeed justly for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds but this man has done nothing wrong and he said Jesus Lord remember me when you come into your kingdom let's just take that very briefly it looks as if both of these criminals to begin with were railing against Christ casting accusations at him that's what we find when you look at Matthew 27 verse 44 there's antagonism there's mockery on the part of both but then a change comes over one and it's evident when the one that wasn't saved kept on railing at him when the other one then rebuked him you can see the change has already happened something has happened in this man so that he stopped his railing and instead of railing at

Jesus as the other one is still doing he's now pleading with Jesus to be merciful to remember him the things that he has heard the things that he has seen the Jesus himself that's beside him especially all of these things have come to affect him so acutely so powerfully so deeply that now he's concerned that he will be remembered by this Christ and there are two things in the request that he makes where he recognizes two important things he recognizes his own guilt he says to his fellow criminal we are here justly we are receiving the reward that is due to us for our crimes we deserve this but this man has done nothing wrong remember how Luke constantly brings across the sinlessness of Jesus the perfection of Christ so that he brings us to the conclusion that he's not here because there's something wrong in himself he's here because he's standing in for others this man has done nothing wrong he sees his own guilt he recognizes the sinlessness of Christ and he brings the two together because he realizes that the sinless

Christ is the provision that has been made to deal with his guilt Lord remember me and you see he recognizes that Jesus is indeed a king the inscription that's above the cross of Christ this is the king of the Jews this criminal has accepted it as the truth and he says to Jesus Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom and we don't know to what extent the man understood the kingdom of Christ and the kingship of Christ but he understood it enough so that he could make this great request that when Jesus came into his kingdom and it seems that he had in mind when Jesus died and he was going to enter into the kingdom of which he was the king and he's now saying Lord when that happens please remember me don't forget me take me into your kingdom in other words he didn't want to be left out of this kingdom under the kingship of this person what a great prayer that is there aren't many words to it but it really is comprehensive it's really saying to yourself and to myself tonight as you have come to realize anew your guilt your sin your need of salvation your need of forgiveness your need of being put right with

[39 : 44] God your need of righteousness as you have come to realize all of these things here is God actually saying to us in this great message here is your prayer then Lord please don't leave me out don't leave me outside your kingdom don't forget me take me with you remember me pity me take account of my situation and then he comes to this wonderful response from the Lord he said to him truly I say to you today you will be with me in paradise he received in the reply a lot more than he had ever thought he didn't know when

Jesus was going to bring him into the kingdom all he asked was Lord remember me when you enter into your kingdom and Jesus in response says not sometime you will be with me in my kingdom but today in other words he's saying when you die when this terrible crucifixion is over for you I'm telling you truly I'm giving you my assurance you will be with me in paradise you think of the mangled body of that criminal wracked with pain for all of this time that he was on the cross distorted through the sufferings that he had to endure and he's dead and his body remains in its mangled form on the cross perhaps hardly recognizable as to who it is such would be the abuse the flogging and the pain of crucifixion itself and many people would pass by and say well it's good to be rid of them they're no more they're gone good riddance where is he his body is on the cross they can look at his mangled body and say what they like but he the person himself consciously is in paradise is with

Jesus in paradise he's crossed over into the garden of god that's what paradise means the garden and it's the garden of god in heaven that's where the thief instantly went to when he left this world and of course there are also these two words that make all the difference that make paradise to be paradise with me truly I say to you today you will be with me in paradise where do you expect to go when the course of your life in this world is over if this is the last week of your life if tonight is the last night of your life where will you be not where will your body be where will you be where will you consciously be will you be with christ is your prayer tonight lord don't forget me take me with you be my savior because that's what luke has been saying to us all along who is this man he is the one we can't live without he is the one our eternity must be built on he is the one to whom we pray lord remember me don't forget me take me into your kingdom save me be my king also let's pray lord our god we truly find ourselves amazed at the detail of your word find ourselves difficult to comprehend the extent of your suffering we know that we cannot fully understand it in all its extent but we give thanks that we know it has been sufficient to atone for our sins we bless you tonight that you died that you died the death that was required that you are alive forever more that you have come to be presented in the gospel as the savior of sinners we pray gracious lord this evening that you would draw our hearts after you that we may find from what we have heard this evening of your word that we too have this great cry out of a sincere regard that you would remember us too as you did that individual here as we pray for your glory sake

Amen