

At the Cross

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[0 : 00] Let's turn again to the chapter we read in Luke's Gospel, Luke chapter 23. Luke chapter 23.

Now I want us tonight just to consider this section that we read. Just read at verse 35. And the people stood by watching him, but the ruler scoffed at him, saying, He saved others. Let him save himself. If he is the Christ of God, his chosen one.

And the soldiers also mocked him. If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself. And so on. So we've now come to the place, to the point where we find that Jesus is hanging on the cross.

And this is the moment that the authorities have longed for, for ages. This is the moment they've dreamt about. And they think this is the end of Christ and the end of the movement, the end of his followers, the end of everything.

And little did they realize that in many ways that what was taking place at this particular moment was to grow and grow and grow, to become a global movement that would encircle the whole world.

[1 : 21] Just like, remember the dream that Nebuchadnezzar had in the book of Daniel? And where he saw all these great, the great image with the head of gold and the chest of silver and the, of brass and of iron and of clay.

This great image. And then there was this little stone made without hands that came and smashed the image. And the stone grew till it filled the whole world. This, of course, was looking at the different empires.

Like the Babylonian Empire and then the Persian Empire and then the Greek Empire and the Roman Empire. And it was at the time of the Roman Empire that this little stone made without hands came and came and smashed these empires.

And, of course, that's, this is the full. It's amazing how the Bible prophecy, as we look and they're able to see the way it all ties in together. And here is the growth and the development of the kingdom of God.

And so Jesus is on the cross now, as we've said before, while at a human level, he's, the nails have been hammered into his hands and feet. And he's hanging there upon the cross that ultimately it wasn't the nails that kept him there.

[2 : 39] But his own love, his love to his father and his love to us. Because Jesus could have at any point turned away. Jesus could have at any point caused global upheaval if he so desired.

But he didn't. He was in keeping with the will of God. To do thy will I take delight. Remember how he said he could send for twelve legions of angels. And they would have annihilated humanity if he had so desired.

But that was not his desire. He came in order to save. And so it was these, it was a love that he had, the commitment that he had, that held him to the cross.

And although they mocked him below the cross and they were saying, you know, save yourself. You've saved others. Let's see you save yourself. If you are the Christ, come down from the cross. They were mocking him and jeering.

And the funny thing, or the strange thing is that what they were actually saying was true. They were asking Jesus now to save himself.

[3 : 42] That he had saved others but he couldn't save himself. And you know, that was absolutely true. Because Jesus couldn't have saved others if he was to save himself. It was because he was saving others that he refused to save himself.

If he had come down from the cross to save himself, then the salvation of the world for you and me would not be there. And so it really was a remarkable time.

And although they were hurling their insults at him there and mocking at him, and the words that they spoke, although they were words in their eyes, words of jest, words of mockery, there certainly was an element of truth in them.

And then the focus moves for a little while from below the cross to what's taking place on the cross. It's the three crosses that are there. And Jesus, of course, is in the middle.

As the Bible says, he was numbered with the transgressors. And we have these two criminals, one on either side. And we notice that both of them are speaking.

[4 : 52] And indeed, at one level we could say that both of them pray. Although we may question whether one of them actually prays or not.

One of the prayers is most certainly a prayer of sincerity, a prayer of genuine desire, a prayer of humility. The other one we would say is a prayer of rage and a prayer of even sarcasm, a prayer of unbelief.

And the reason that we would in any way term it, a prayer is that this criminal says to Jesus, save us.

He asks, there's this, that they would all be saved. Because one of the criminals who was, we see that in verse 39, are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us.

And you can almost hear the anger in his voice. Now, it's very obvious that this man, in fact, both of these criminals, are on the cross for something very serious.

[5 : 59] Crucifixion, as we know, was an awful form. It was a worst form of public execution going. So it was obviously something serious that had taken place.

And we're told that they knew this would be the result. Because in verse 41, the other criminal says, We indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds.

But this man has done nothing amiss. So both these men, that's what they're saying here, is that we are receiving the due reward of our deeds.

In other words, these men knew the law. And they knew that if they did what they did, that they would die. And yet, they did.

They carried on. Oblivious, careless, indifferent to what the law said. The law is saying, do this, and you will die. They did it. And now they're dying.

[7 : 04] And that's why this criminal is facing up and he says, Look, we knew. We knew what would happen if we carried on in a particular course of action.

And we carried on. And now we're getting what we were told we would get. And you know, in a funny way, that's how so often humanity operates.

So many people know what God says. God says, the soul that sinneth, it shall die. And we're all sinners. And we're all, because of our sin, we're all under the sentence of death.

And if we believe the Bible at all, then we know that God is telling us so clearly and graphically in no uncertain terms, that unless we repent and unless we become right with him through Jesus, then we will die.

Die in our sin. Die eternally. And we know it. But you know, so often, like the criminals, we somehow push God's law, God's ways, God's word aside, and somehow carry on and expect that everything's going to be all right.

[8 : 23] Well, it can't. And you see, it's just because we're so used to the course of life we live on. We're so used to how things are.

And we think, it's always going to be like this. It's always going to be all right. But one day, it won't. There comes that point. For these criminals, one day, it wasn't all right.

One day, they were caught. The sentence was passed. The sentence is carried out. That's it. That was the law. This is the sentence. And it's the same. God is saying exactly the same thing to us.

He says, carry on. Carry on as you are. And you will die. Unless you find refuge and forgiveness and pardon by the provision I have made in and through Jesus Christ.

And so you see how important it is to turn to Jesus. I hope tonight, if you're here without Christ, that you don't push these words aside.

[9 : 28] They're not my words. These aren't words that have been handed down from theologians. This is God's word. We either accept it all or reject it all.

And if you, deep down, if you're saying, well, I actually believe it's true. Well, let me ask. If you believe it's true, what are you doing about it? You've got to do something.

You can't ignore it. Because as we say, there will come a day of reckoning. Well, here we find this Christ-rejecting sinner dying in his sin on the cross.

But some people may say, but doesn't he offer a prayer? Doesn't he say, if you are the Christ, save yourself and us? Really, that's what he's saying. Save us. Save all of us.

Save yourself and us. But the saving that this criminal is asking about or asking for is not salvation. It's not to be forgiven his sin.

[10 : 29] He simply wants down from the cross in order to continue in the lifestyle and in the way that he had always lived. It's nothing to know, nothing about God's salvation.

And, you know, we can make a mockery of God, too. Because sometimes we may offer a prayer similar to that.

We're asking God somehow to save us, but save us in a way that won't interrupt how we are, how we live, how things are. We're like the man Balaam.

Remember Balaam in the scripture. He wanted to live the life of the unrighteous, but he wanted to die the death of the righteous. He wanted to live a life ignoring God, forgetting about God, live to himself, indulge himself, worship himself, all about himself.

But at the end of the day, when he came to breathe his last, he said, I want to be like a righteous man dying. Well, that's not the way it works. You know, that's kind of making a mockery of God.

[11 : 36] It's like saying to the Lord, Lord, throughout my life I'm going to totally ignore you. And I want you, Lord, to fill my life with good things.

And day by day bring my life so that everything will work well. But I'm rarely going to stop and give you thanks. And I want to live life in such a way that I will forget about everybody but myself.

I want to take all the glory to myself. I want to take all the credit to myself. I want my life to be about me. But, oh, by the way, when I come to die, I want you to save me.

Well, the Lord isn't going to answer that kind of prayer. Man's chief end is to glorify God. And if we think that life is about ourselves simply to glorify ourselves, take all the glory and credit to ourselves, and to forget about our maker, our sustainer, our God, then we've got it all wrong.

And if we're thinking that way, we need to have our mind changed, our heart changed. And we need to ask the Lord, Lord, change my thought pattern. If that's the way you're thinking tonight, ask the Lord to change that way of thinking.

[12 : 53] Because it's our way of death. God will answer. Let me say that. God will answer. The cry of the sinner to the very last moment.

And the other criminal that we're just coming to see, we'll see that in a moment. And we see how he was saved. Because his cry was different. It was a cry that was wanting the Lord.

You see, we must want the Lord. Not just as a kind of insurance policy at the very last moment, taking out the last day. The Lord wants us for himself.

He says, he's really saying, you're missing out on life by not knowing me. Yes, life is full of good things. And let's remember all the good things that we have in life.

God has given them to us. What do you have? That's what the Bible says. What do you have that you did not receive? And you may be saying to yourself, well, actually, I worked for this.

[14 : 01] It's my abilities that provided in this way. Who gave you the abilities? Who gave you the capacity? Who gave you all these things?

It's God. And that's what the Bible tells us. Every good and perfect gift is from above. So our life is filled with all the good things that God has given to us.

And we've got to remember that. But the Lord is saying, but there's something greater and deeper and more profound. And that's me. Don't just look at the gifts.

Look at the giver. And I want you to come to know me. So that you'll get that fulfillment for the depth of your life right into your soul. It will make life meaningful.

Be a purpose to it. So this is what we need to do. This is who we need to come to know the Lord. But then we see the other criminal.

[14 : 59] Now it's very interesting. We're told in Matthew's gospel, for instance, that both criminals at first they turned on Christ. Both of them were initially mocking. But one changes.

And an awareness comes over this man that the passion beside him on the cross is indeed the Son of God. And there's a wonderful honesty about him.

Because he comes and he doesn't try and justify why he's there. Or justify and make excuses. He is saying, as we saw so clearly, he says in verse 40, The other rebuked him, saying, Do you not fear God, since you're under the same con?

We indeed justly, for we are receiving the due rewards of our deeds. This is justice. We are being dealt with justly. See, so often we try and blame home, environment, friends, circumstances, loads of things.

People are always finding some reason, some excuse. This man isn't trying to do that. He's not trying to justify himself in any way. He says, I did it.

[16 : 13] I was wrong. And I'm receiving the just penalty for my wrongdoing. Having faced up to what he is, he turns to Jesus.

And he says, Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And it's amazing because the faith of this man, because he saw Jesus there on the cross as a Savior.

You know, it's quite remarkable. Because here is the Messiah. And if ever a person looked less like the Messiah, it was the Lord Jesus at that moment.

There, hanging on the cross, suffocating, blood pouring out, his face battered and bruised and totally unrecognizable from the fearful beatings he had.

And yet he turns around and he looks to him. And he says, Lord, he recognizes this is the Son of God. It's a remarkable moment.

[17 : 14] turning to the most un-Christ-like looking person. But recognizing the beauty, the saving power, the might, the majesty of the Savior who is beside him.

This was faith, great faith. And so he turns to Jesus and he asks to be saved. And Jesus hears and answers the prayer. Truly, he says, I say to you today, you will be with me in paradise.

What a change. One moment lost, then found. One moment in darkness, then light. Death, life, suffering and shame. And then it's going to be bliss and glory.

You know, we must never underestimate the power of Christ to save. all it takes is a sincere cry, a genuine cry.

Lord, save me. Sometimes, you might be here and you might have sometimes spoken to the Lord about salvation. But you know, we can, the Lord knows exactly what our words mean.

[18 : 27] He knows whether this is coming from our heart or purely from our lips. And if that cry is coming from our heart where we are, as it were, at the end of ourselves and say, Lord, I can't do this anymore.

Lord, I need you. Come into my heart. Come into my life. Save me. The Lord will. He will.

And that's what, that's where we need to come. And that's obviously where this man had come. And that, of course, is why Jesus came into the world to save those who are lost.

And then from verse 44, we find how the land is plunged into darkness. An amazing moment here. Well, it's not a moment, amazing hours. It's almost as if the natural sun in the sky had to hide its face from what's happening.

Here is this awful moment where the Son of God in human nature is dying upon the cross. The one who was involved in the creation of the Son.

[19 : 37] The one who was involved in the creation of all things. Without Him, we're told in Scripture, without Him was, nothing was made that was made. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the second person of the Godhead, was involved in all the creation.

And here He is. And it's like the sun, which is at the very heartbeat of our life. It's like it's hiding its face. But of course, we know that that was also symbolic because it was speaking also of the darkness that was enveloping the soul of Christ as He was experiencing God's wrath and curse for sin.

And then we're told again as Jesus comes to die and if we were to follow through, if we were doing a study on, simply, on the chronological order of all that took place, then we'd be bringing all the other gospel writers in to it as well.

But we see here that also the veil, the big curtain in the temple that separated the holy place from the most holy place that it was torn from top to bottom.

And of course, the most holy place was the place nobody dared to go into. Nobody could see in there. Only the high priest was allowed in there once a year. Now it's torn, it's open.

[21 : 03] And this is speaking about how the work, when Jesus cried on the cross, it is finished. It's as if He, it's tearing open and bursting open, direct access through Himself to the Father.

All the old world, which was a world of shadows and types and symbols and all the sacrifice, everything's come to an end because the fulfillment of it all has been worked out in Jesus.

And so this is torn. It must have been an amazing thing for anybody who was in the temple at that moment to see this rip all the way down. And so that, that took place.

And then in verse 46, we have these amazing words from the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Then Jesus calling out with a loud voice said, Father, into your hands I commit to my spirit.

And having said this, He breathed His last. These are the last words that our Savior spoke publicly in this world.

[22 : 08] The last words He ever spoke publicly in this world, before a watching world. Jesus spoke words after the resurrection, but we don't believe that Jesus was seen again after the resurrection, but by His own people.

Although Jesus was appearing and disappearing, and He revealed Himself on many occasions to a lot of different people, we believe that they were simply to His own people, and that the world never saw Him again.

There was an exception to that, of course, with Saul of Tarsus, in his confession, where Jesus revealed Himself as the risen, almighty, glorious Savior.

But here is the last, this is in His state of humiliation, the last words that He speaks in His state of humiliation. And it's quite an extraordinary where we find that Jesus is breathing His last.

As we read elsewhere, He dismissed His spirit. This is the moment when death occurs, the severance of soul from body. And of course, the only way that the Son of God could die was by taking human nature to Himself.

[23 : 28] It would be impossible for Him to die in any other way unless He took to Himself a body as we are. And so Jesus, at this point, and this is what is amazing, is that Christ was in control right to the very end.

And He makes this loud cry. We're told that, that it was with a loud cry that He made, that then Jesus calling out with a loud voice.

And that's amazing because crucifixion, ultimately death came about through total suffocation. The respiratory system was just, it just collapsed, so to speak, where the person was crushed and crushed and crushed.

And where breathing became virtually impossible. And to be able to cry out with a loud voice at the moment of death would be impossible.

But we see here that Christ, right up to the point of death, is, as it were, in control. And He dismisses His own spirit.

[24 : 39] And so we find Him also that He is committing Himself into the Father's hand. And then He yielded up His spirit. You make sure, my friend, that when you come to die, that your soul has been committed into the Father's hand.

I cannot think of anything more terrifying than being launched out into the great eternity all on your own.

All on your own. You know this, I cannot think of a more fearful picture. With all security, all that we're used to, gone, all on your own, you make sure that your life has been put into the hand of the Lord.

And so we find here, then, that we're looking at the cross, we've been looking below the cross, we've been looking to the characters on the cross, but now we come back for a moment again to what's happening below the cross.

And I believe there's another person who has come to faith below the cross. A person has come to faith on the cross, and I believe a person has come to faith below the cross.

[25 : 59] Because the centurion, and this is an amazing statement here, because we find in verse 47 now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, certainly, this man was innocent.

This was a righteous man. And, in fact, when we look at it in other translations, or in other gospel writers, that this man makes a declaration that this truly was the Son of God.

That's what he said, truly. This was the Son of God. Isn't that extraordinary? Here's the man in charge of the execution, the centurion, the man who would have been put over, the Roman soldiers, were told in one of the other gospel writers that he stood apart and he was watching.

And I suppose that was his job. That's what he had to do. That everything was to be done in a decent, in an order way. That was part of his work. And so he was standing there observing.

And for these hours, he observed Christ, and he observed what took place. And he heard Jesus speaking seven times from the cross. And the very first time he spoke was a prayer.

[27 : 12] Father, forgive them, for they know not what they're doing. And we believe here is the first answer to that prayer. Because the one in charge is now making this declaration.

He's praising God. And he's saying, truly, this was the Son of God. And it's also very interesting that the man in charge of the crucifixion says that Jesus is innocent.

Pilate, the Roman governor, says Jesus is innocent. King Herod says Jesus is innocent. So that all those at the highest official level who try Jesus say he is innocent.

And that man in charge of the crucifixion says he's innocent. Isn't it extraordinary how blinkered how sin is? But then finally, we see again somebody giving great witness of our love to the Lord Jesus.

You see, and rightly so, we focus, and that has always got to be our focus upon Christ. But it's important to see the work that is going on. As we saw work on the cross, work below the cross, and now somebody away, distant from the cross, who comes out from the shadows and gives a clear testimony and declaration and confession of their love for Jesus.

[28 : 40] And that was Joseph of Arimathea. Now we're told in John's Gospel that this man, Joseph, was a secret disciple. In other words, he had never nailed his colors to the mast.

He was afraid to. Now we read here that he didn't agree, he didn't consent to what took place. He was against the decision of the Jewish council to the death of Jesus.

But he was a secret disciple. He had never come out publicly and said, I believe in Jesus. My life has been given to Jesus. And here he comes at the most dangerous time.

It's wonderful. I love what this man does. And he goes straight to Pilate. He was obviously a man of means and of money, of wealth. He goes straight to Pilate and he begs for the body of Jesus.

He says, I'll deal with it. Because if he hadn't done that, in all probability, those who were crucified, their bodies probably were just thrown away in a rubbish heap.

[29 : 43] They were discarded. So he comes and he asks for the body of Jesus. Now we're not told here, but in John's Gospel we're told he was accompanied by somebody else, Nicodemus.

Another man who lived in the shadow, so to speak. He came to Jesus by night when nobody could see. And so these two secret disciples came out from the shadow and made a public testimony of their devotion and their love to the Lord.

And you see the power of the cross. What's happening on the crosses? What's happening below the cross? What's happening a bit away from the cross?

Christ is at work. I'm going to leave you with this question. Where would you have been? Where would I have been at the scene of the cross?

In fact, let us ask the question, where are you tonight in relation to what has happened on the cross? That is the most important question.

[30 : 52] Where am I tonight in relation to what has happened here on the cross? Are you following Jesus?

Or are you hidden away a secret disciple? Are you still outside the kingdom? I would ask you tonight to consider what Jesus has done.

Consider where you are yourself. And if you are outside the kingdom, please, please, please come to Christ tonight. Let's pray.

O Lord, O God, we give thanks again for this great word. We give thanks, O Lord, for a great saviour who has done everything for us.

Lord, we pray that we might believe in Jesus, that we may receive Jesus into our heart, into our soul, that we might know him as Lord and king of our life.

[32 : 02] O Lord, do us good, cleanse us from our every sin, we pray. Take us home safely and receive us in Jesus' name we ask it. Amen.