

Luke's Gospel: Chapter 23

Jesus' trial, crucifixion and burial

Jesus before Pilate and Herod (Luke 23 v 1 to 17)

When the Jewish leaders first brought Jesus to Pilate, they accused him of promoting himself as a king in defiance of Caesar (v 2). They wanted to make Jesus seem like a dangerous revolutionary against the Roman Empire. Therefore, Pilate asked Jesus the simple question (v 3): "Are you the King of the Jews?" "I find no guilt in this man" (v 4) – this was Pilate's verdict. Though Pilate was a cruel man he was not stupid. He could see through the motives of the religious leaders, and had no problem in summing up the whole situation by this declaration. Hoping to avoid making a judgment about Jesus, Pilate sent him to Herod, the 'puppet' ruler of Galilee. Jesus refused to say anything to Herod (v 9), so Herod returned Jesus to Pilate (v 11)...

"When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him" (v 8) – Herod had surely heard much about Jesus, but his only interest was a desire to be amused and entertained. Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, never took Jesus seriously: "he was hoping to see some sign done by him."

- Consider the silence of Jesus before Herod (v 9), and compare Luke's account with Matthew 27 v 14 (Jesus' silence before Pilate). What are the lessons for our own life and witness?
- What was Jesus' attitude to Pilate and to Herod? Are there people like Pilate and Herod today?
- Consider what Jesus had to suffer, and how he bore it. See 1 Peter 2 v 19 to 23; Philippians 2 v 5 to 8.

"Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day" (v 12) – significantly, Herod and Pilate became friends, but they found no common ground except their opposition to Jesus.

"After examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him" (v 14) – Pilate eloquently declared Jesus innocent of any crime. This was the result of his careful examination of both Jesus and the evidence brought against him. "I will therefore punish him and release him" (v 16) – Pilate did not suggest a light punishment. The Roman custom of scourging was a brutal whipping. The blows came from a whip with many leather strands, having sharp pieces of bone or metal at the ends. It reduced the back to raw flesh, and it was not unusual for a criminal to die from scourging, even before crucifixion.

Pilate delivers Jesus to be crucified (Luke 23 v 18 to 25)

- What were the stages of Pilate's capitulation? What was his overriding motive?
- Barabbas, a criminal, was released instead of Jesus. In what ways can our experience echo that of Barabbas? In what sense is Barabbas a 'model' for every believer?

"Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas" (v 18) – the crowd, whom Pilate was convinced would release Jesus, instead condemned him. Because of this, Pilate did not find the courage to oppose both the religious leaders and the crowd.

We may imagine that many in this crowd had, just a few days before, cried out "Hosanna" to Jesus. However, it is more likely that most of these who cried, "Crucify him!" (v 21) were local residents of Jerusalem, rather than the pilgrims from Galilee and other places who had welcomed Jesus on the day He entered Jerusalem.

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“He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder... but he delivered Jesus over to their will” (v 25) – the crowd rejected Jesus and embraced Barabbas, whose name means ‘son of the father’, and who was a terrorist and a murderer. If anyone should be able to say, ‘Jesus died for me’, it was Barabbas: he knew what it was to have Jesus die on his behalf, the innocent for the guilty!

The crucifixion (Luke 23 v 26 to 43)

Simon knew little if anything about Jesus, and probably had no desire to be associated with a man who was condemned to die as a criminal. Yet the Romans ruled, and Simon was not given a choice. They compelled him to carry his cross – perhaps he was chosen because he was an obvious foreigner and more conspicuous in the crowd. There is a tradition that later Simon came to know what it really meant to take up one’s cross and follow Jesus, and that his sons became leaders among the early Christians (Mark 15 v 21, Romans 16 v 13).

‘Golgotha’, in Latin ‘Calvary’ (v 33, King James Version), means ‘Place of a Skull’, so called because it was the place where criminals were crucified. It was outside the city walls, yet on a well-established road. The hill itself may have had a skull-like appearance, as is the case with the site known as ‘Gordon's Calvary’.

- Picture Jesus on the way to crucifixion. What impression would his condition and words have made on the “great multitude of the people and of women” (v 27)?
- What caused Jesus to warn the “daughters of Jerusalem” (v 28)?
- What are the ironies in the charges and jeers directed against Jesus on the cross, particularly, “He saved others; let him save himself” (v 35)?
- What brought the ‘other criminal’ to repentance and faith (v 42)? What do we learn from his confession and request, and from Jesus’ response?

The death of Jesus (Luke 23 v 44 to 49)

- What does Luke’s account tell us of the significance of Jesus’ death? What was the effect of Jesus’ death on the various people present?
- What is the significance of the temple curtain being “torn in two” (v 45)? The curtain separated the ‘holy place’ from the ‘most holy place’: it was a vivid demonstration of the separation between God and man. Note that the curtain was torn from *top to bottom* (Matthew 27 v 51) – it was God who did the tearing!

At this moment, a holy transaction took place. God the Father regarded God the Son as if he were a sinner. As Paul would later write, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5 v 21). As terrible as the physical suffering of Jesus was, this spiritual suffering – the act of being judged for sin in our place – was what Jesus really dreaded about the cross. This was the ‘cup’ of God’s righteous wrath (Psalm 75 v 8, Isaiah 51 v 17, Jeremiah 25 v 15). Jesus became, as it were, an enemy of God who was judged and forced to drink the cup of the Father’s fury, so that we would not have to drink that cup...

Jesus is buried (Luke 23 v 50 to 56)

- Jesus’ mission had apparently failed – but what do the actions of Joseph and the women teach us?
- Why do you think Joseph of Arimathea (a member of the Sanhedrin) and the women (v 55), and not the disciples, were present when Jesus died and his body needed a tomb?

“This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus” (v 52) – the bodies of crucified criminals were often left on their crosses to rot or be eaten by wild animals, but the Jews wanted no such horror displayed during the Passover season, and Romans were known to grant the corpses to friends or relatives for proper burial. Joseph did *not* serve Jesus in many ways, but he did serve him in ways no one else did, or could. It was not possible for Peter, James, John, or even the many women who served Jesus to provide a tomb, but Joseph could and did. We must serve the Lord Jesus in whatever way we can...