

Receiving and Responding to Christ's Substitution (Part I)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 August 2025

Preacher: Josh Johnston

[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn now to our Bibles, and Josh is going to be preaching from Luke's Gospel, chapter 23. We've been going through these chapters more recently in the evenings, but on and off over many months.

And we've come to chapter 23 of Luke's Gospel. If you need a Bible, if you don't have a Bible with you, there's Vista's Bibles at the sides, at the back and at the front here. Feel free to pick one up, Red Bibles, and you'll find a reading there on page 883. And I'm going to read from verse 1 to 25 of Luke's Gospel, chapter 23.

Then the whole company of them arose and brought Jesus before Pilate, and they began to accuse him, saying, We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.

Pilate asked him, Are you the king of the Jews? And he answered him, You have said so. Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, I find no guilt in this man.

But they were urgent, saying, He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee, even to this place. When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean.

[1 : 24] And when he learned that he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him.

And he was hoping to see some sign done by him. So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him.

And Herod, with his soldiers, treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate.

And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day. For before this, they had been at enmity with each other. Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers of the people. And he said to them, You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him.

[2 : 30] Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. And I will therefore punish and release him. But they all cried out together, away with this man.

And released to us Barabbas. A man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city. And for murder. Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus.

But they kept shouting, Crucify! Crucify him! A third time he said to them, Why? What evil has he done? I have found in him no guilt deserving death.

I'll therefore punish him and release him. But they were urgent, demanding, with loud cries, that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed.

So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked.

[3 : 39] But he delivered Jesus over to their will. Amen. May God bless to us his word.

But now turn again in your Bibles to Luke chapter 23. At the heart of the gospel is a great substitution.

The gospel offers to us a great exchange, to exchange corruption for cleanness, guilt for innocence, wrath for salvation.

And as we reach the climax of Luke's gospel, and as he shows us what it means to follow Jesus to his glorious kingdom, the reality of substitution is crucial.

There is no gospel, no hope without it, no entrance into his kingdom without it. We've been seeing that these closing chapters of Luke show us Jesus as the true Passover lamb.

[4 : 50] Last week we saw the weight and wonder of Jesus' submission to his Father's will, being willing to drink the cup of wrath. And Jesus continuing on the path to be taken up in glory means not just submission to his Father's will, but substitution.

The innocent lamb taking the place of the guilty. And now chapter 23 deals with the event surrounding the cross where that substitution happens, surrounding Jesus' death.

But it's interesting as we come to chapter 23 to note that Luke deals with the event of the crucifixion in just two short phrases. Verse 33, There they crucified him.

Not a great amount of detail. Almost matter of fact. Likewise, verse 46. Having said this, he breathed his last.

No great fanfare, no prolonged detail. We might expect that something of the grim and gory detail is communicated so that we can fully appreciate what Jesus went through.

[6 : 04] But as we saw last week, the full weight of the cross isn't that Jesus died. It is what was going on in and through his death. And so we need to follow where Luke is leading us with the events of Jesus' death.

His emphasis is much more on the explanation of Jesus' death than on the event of it. So yes, he gives us the facts of Jesus' death, but also he surrounds it with a significance of what it was doing, what it was achieving, and also how we can take hold of it.

And so this chapter, chapter 23, spends a great deal more time on the meaning of the cross and the responses to what's happening there than on the event itself. And so that's where our attention needs to be this week and next.

This week we'll look at part one, Jesus the substitute. Next week, part two, the responses to Jesus' substitutionary death. And so the first thing that we see this morning, verses one to 16, is innocence proven.

Innocence proven. God has displayed that Jesus is the guiltless one, the lamb without blemish, who is able to let the guilty go free.

[7 : 21] Now, Jesus has already faced trial before the religious establishment. We saw that back in chapter 22 from verse 66. There, at the religious trial, Jesus was brought before the council and they were hoping that he would incriminate himself.

They asked, verse 70, are you then the son of God? And they take Jesus' response as a confirmation that he claims to be. So Jesus has been charged with blasphemy before the religious leaders.

But here, in our passage, the reality was that because Israel were an occupied nation, they didn't have the power to execute Jesus.

The goal of the religious establishment was Jesus' death. They have been seeking to do that now for a number of chapters. But they aren't capable of such a thing.

And so we move from the sacred trial to the state trial. Verse 1, Jesus is brought before Pilate, the appointed Roman official for this region. Verse 2, accusations are leveled against Jesus.

[8 : 29] But notice the charges have somewhat changed from the religious trial. They claim that Jesus is misleading the nation, forbidding tribute, being given to Caesar, saying that he's a Christ, a king, a rival.

And the emphasis of the trial before the religious leaders was blasphemy, but now it's insurrection. And that detail reveals the hallmark of those who intend evil, doesn't it?

Because here, we have outright lies. Jesus actually said the opposite about giving tribute to Caesar, didn't he? Render to Caesar that which is Caesar's. That's what he'd said.

He didn't fall for their trap. And so these are lies. But those lies are also then mixed with the twisting of truth and reality.

They're conflated together. The claim that was made at the religious trial about Jesus being the Christ, that's now conflated with these claims of Jesus refusing Caesar's rule, telling people not to obey it.

[9 : 33] And at this point, it becomes serious for the state, doesn't it? Pilate wouldn't care a jot about blasphemy, but insurrection on the other hand. That was a serious matter.

That would have his neck on the line. As the Roman prefect of the region, he was there to maintain order in the service of Caesar. So you see, it's obvious here what the religious leaders are up to,

isn't it?

Blasphemy wasn't enough of a charge in a political setting. Blasphemy wouldn't cut it here. They need to up the ante before Pilate. And so lies are conflated with shreds of truth to fashion the charge of insurrection.

Jesus means to rival Caesar. He's a threat to mother room. That's the charge that needs to stick in order for Jesus to die. And now, we don't get the ins and outs of Pilate's inquisition with Jesus in verse 3.

Luke simply tells us the point that he's concerned with. Pilate does question Jesus, but verse 4 concludes, I find no guilt in this man.

[10:43] I find no guilt in this man. But the crowds are not happy. You see, they are now urgently protesting, claiming that he stirs up the people, verse 5, that Jesus stirs up the people.

When here, we have a crowd stirring up the scent before Pilate's judgment, not accepting it. Well, Pilate finds, in their words, a possible out, verse 5.

He's stirring things up from Galilee even to this place. Aha, thinks Pilate. as politicians so often do, a fudge, a way out. Is he Galilean?

Well, then, verse 7, let's go over to Herod. That's his jurisdiction. Notice the detail there in verse 12 about Pilate becoming friends with Herod on that day. It's interesting, isn't it, that the animosity that each, their animosity towards each other changes to alliance in the face of Jesus.

strange alliances can form when it's in opposition to Jesus. So, over to Herod it goes. And it's interesting, isn't it? Here are the appointed rulers abdicating their rule, not leading, but being led by the crowds as politicians so often are.

[12:04] Here are claims and trials about a king, but all other authority figures are devoid of just that, devoid of authority in this picture, for the people and priests won't submit to them. We will have our way.

Whereas here, here is Jesus not just, not resisting, because really he was setting about establishing his own reign. The schemes of man will never thwart the plan of God.

And so Jesus arrives with Herod, now verse 8, and Herod's pleased. Herod has long been intrigued by Jesus back in chapter 9, we read of this.

He'd been left perplexed by Jesus' ministry and he wanted to see him. But Herod's interest in Jesus was mere fascination. It was never rooted in any notion of faith.

Herod wants Jesus to do a sign, do you see? He's heard about Jesus' ministry and it's piqued his interest, tickled his fancy, perhaps with some entertainment to be had here. But, Herod was a man who'd refused to heed the word of God through the prophet of God.

[13:12] John the Baptist had confronted Herod with the need to repent, giving Herod opportunity to receive the great sign, the word of God itself. But instead, what did Herod do?

He detains and then decapitates the messenger. But now, finally, faced with Jesus himself, he meets, verse 9, only silence.

Hardened refusal of God's word, hardened refusal to repent, in the end, will lead to silence and worse. Now, no matter how much interest there might be in other aspects of Jesus, ignoring His word is ignoring the greatest sign.

Because fascination with Jesus is not faith. intrigue at any spectacle around Jesus doesn't bring an interest in salvation.

Indeed, a tentative interest or curiosity about Jesus that never goes as far as hearing and heeding His words may just lead some of us to end up like Herod. You see, Herod's only response in the midst of these accusations is to mock, to lead the way in mocking the notion of Jesus being king.

[14:29] Verse 11, his mockery extends to sending Jesus back in splendid clothing to make fun of such a claim about Jesus being a king. Look at this silly thing.

Put some clues on him so he looks like the thing he's claiming. So with this, Pilate's fudge hasn't panned out, has it? Because here, Herod sends him back, coming to the same conclusion. Jesus' claims are worthy of mockery but not murder. And so Pilate attempts to draw the trial to an end. Verse 14, after examining the claims and the evidence, he proclaims, I do not find this man guilty of any of the charges you bring.

Verse 15, nothing deserving death has been done. In case we've missed Luke's point, look down into verse 22.

What evil has he done? I find no guilt deserving death in him. No guilt deserving death. Do you see Luke's big point here?

[15:36] Jesus is innocent. Three times that's the conclusion. It's the conclusion from the regional prefect of the Roman Empire, the conclusion from the ruler of the Jewish people. Thus, it is the settled conclusion of the rightly established authority that is in place to uphold justice.

This is not the manufactured or unjust verdict of a corrupt judge who's been paid off. No. It's a universal declaration of innocence. Luke tells us again and again, no guilt is found in him. And that matters because only the spotless can stand in place of the guilty. The original Passover lamb was the one that was without blemish.

Or listen to the writer of the Hebrews who says, Jesus offered himself without blemish to God to purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. Or Peter.

Peter tells us we were ransomed not with silver or gold but with the precious blood of Christ like that of a lamb without spot or blemish. And Paul.

[16:44] Paul says for our sake he became sin for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

That's why Luke keeps repeating no guilt. Jesus is the spotless lamb condemned so that the guilty might go free. That's the only hope that there is in the gospel for we have a dual problem.

Not only do we have a record of debt that needs to be paid. Not only are we guilty so that a punishment needs to be paid on our behalf but we also lack the positive record of righteousness that we ought to have.

And so Jesus' innocence here establishes not only that there is a sacrifice that can cover our debt so that God's wrath is poured out on a substitute but also that he has a perfect record which he can share with us.

Listen to those words from Paul again for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

[17:55] The religious establishment concocted trials in search of a means of killing Jesus but despite their best efforts here crying out of this story is that Jesus is innocent.

He is the perfect one. God has orchestrated events so that Jesus isn't dragged off in the back of a chariot to have his throat slit. No, his death will come at the end of a trial that will see him declared innocent and his death will be public so that the enduring image of Jesus' substitution stands for eternity.

That the guiltless one died in the place of the guilty. Now when I was a child it was a common occurrence that I'd arrive home covered in mud or with bloody knees from falling playing outside rolling around on the ground and my mum would give me a clean cloth to clean me off and sure enough with a clean cloth these things would be washed away but then sure enough the cloth would be covered in all of them.

That's what a clean cloth can do but Luke wants us to be clear on what a clean Christ can do. Luke puts in flashing lights here that no guilt is found in this man.

But it's also worth noticing that Luke has shown us this throughout this section with a lot of irony. So verse 2 we see that it's alleged that Jesus is misleading but he's innocent of that whereas the crowds are the ones engaged in misleading claiming Jesus is saying things that he hasn't said.

[19:43] Verse 5 Jesus stirs up the people well actually he's innocent of that too. The crowds claim he would stop paying taxes to Caesar but here it's the crowd who are denying Caesar's rule through Pilate his appointed prefect.

Verse 11 Jesus' kingship is mocked but doesn't this narrative show that it is Pilate's rule that is having a mockery made out of it.

For he says again and again and again he finds no guilt and yet the crowds will not submit to his ruling. And so actually in this picture it isn't just that Jesus is innocent that he's not guilty but that actually everywhere else we look we see the opposite.

The picture here is that Jesus alone is the innocent one. Here was Jesus pictured amidst all manner of crookedness all around him. And however uncomfortable or cross that might make us feel the Bible is absolutely clear that the heart of man your heart my heart is full of evil and corruption crookedness.

And so Luke goes on to show us secondly verses 18 to 25 iniquity pardoned. Iniquity pardoned. At the heart of Jesus' cross is the profound reality that he really does take the place of those who've

rejected God and opposed his rightful rule.

[21 : 16] Jesus swaps places with the one who is genuinely guilty and lets the criminal go free so that all justice is meted out it is but on Jesus instead that is the offer of the gospel.

And so Pilate made his judgment but we see a little bit of a hint of weakness in him. Do you see verse 16? He finds no guilt in Jesus but nonetheless to appease the crowds to try and find a smooth political solution that gets everyone a win he will still punish Jesus before then releasing him. It's a rather imperfect picture of justice isn't it? Pilate is not in control of the situation is he? He's already wavering and it gets worse.

You see the crowd's shouting has been rising with intensity from urgency verse 5 to vehement accusation verse 10 to unified cries verse 18 until at last the fever pitch of crucify crucify him verse 21.

The kind of deathly chanting we hear today towards Israel rabid crowds chanting for death but here chanting for the death of the innocent one.

[22 : 36] Verse 23 they were urgent demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified and their voices prevailed loud voices that demand to be heard that must get their hearing and must get their way well that's not a recipe for justice is it?

But what is noticeable amidst the welling up of the crowd's collective voice is the absence throughout these verses of a certain voice. Notice Jesus' words in this whole section or lack of. To Pilate he simply says you have said so. To Herod nothing. Why does Jesus remain silent not protest?

Is it a picture of his submission? Yes. As he's prepared to drink the cup that is before him. But I think it's more than that. You see the darkness is already falling upon Jesus.

As we saw through his agonized prayer to his father about the cup of wrath last week. And I take it here that he doesn't protest because he was becoming the guilty one.

[23 : 47] And that as he approaches the cross he was taking on the world's guilt. And listen to Paul in Romans 3. He says now we knew that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law so that every mouth may be stopped and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

Paul is saying in the face of guilt before almighty God there is nothing that can be said and no case can be made. Listen to James Philip on this point he says this is why Jesus was unprotesting and dumb he assumed on himself the guilt of this world's sin and guilt stops a man's mouth.

He had nothing to say during his trial because there is nothing for a guilty man to say before a holy God. And we begin to see in the narrative here the guilt that Jesus was taking on.

And it becomes clearer still. You see the loud voices cry out to Pilate with an added demand. Not only do they demand Jesus is crucified but they also demand that Barabbas something of an interlooper in the story so for her be released.

You can almost sense the abruptness of this request can't you? Who? Where on earth did this come from? It's almost jarring. All of a sudden death chance against Jesus become chance to release some randomer.

[25 : 19] But notice verse 19. What we do know about Barabbas he was in prison rightfully for insurrection and murder.

Not only is Barabbas a genuinely guilty one the added irony is that Barabbas is actually guilty of what Jesus is being accused of and yet the people desire him and Pilate can be convinced.

Pilate seeks to reason with the crowd he asks a third time verse 22 what evil has Jesus done? I find no guilt in him I'll punish and release him.

But no this crowd are not to be stopped and so Pilate relents and grants their demand here was an insurrectionist released from prison the guilty going free and Jesus verse 25 handed over to be crucified the innocent bearing the punishment.

Throughout my training when I was at Cornhill there was an ever present refrain Bob Phile would drill into us that we are not David but we have David's God we see similar throughout and indeed similar from many other figures in the scriptures his point is that we are to be careful about reading ourselves into the situations and actions of those people we read about in the Bible the Bible is ultimately about God not us but here Luke actually means us to see that we are Barabbas I am Barabbas this is a vivid picture of what the offer of the gospel promises that the guilty go free and the innocent bears the punishment that a substitution really does happen one taking the place for another and Jesus two trials before the religious leaders and before the political leaders they bring

two charges blasphemy and insurrection and isn't it true that these are the two things at the very heart of sin itself these are the two things that go right back to the original sin in the garden the place where

[27 : 50] Adam choose to be like God and then so desiring to be like God was prepared to challenge his authority and ignore it and ever since then every single person who has lived on this earth has been guilty of those two things not against Caesar or Rome but against our creator our ultimate ruler you see blasphemy is treating God as less than God either by denying him mocking him or grasping at his place blasphemy is when we deny God's truth rob God of his glory or try to take God's throne when we reinvent God in our own image making him into what we want to be something that suits us when we squeeze him into a mold of our making and end up saying well a loving God would never stop me from doing this or that or whatever that's blasphemy!

authority it's the refusal to submit to God's rule and the insistence on doing things our own way that I have autonomy over me it's my body my choice I'll do what I want with it insurrection is being clear about what God has said clear about his rule and yet refusing to submit to it I know what God says about sex and marriage and a million other things but I don't like it so I am not going to do it these two things together are the root of all sin and so they're at play in every single human heart we are by nature inclined toward both of them they began in the garden and we inherit them they're still the root of all sin and evil in the world today in all manner of decisions we want to go our own way we want to refuse God's rule to make out that we know better to twist his word to suit our wants and desires every time we choose to sin in the things we allow ourselves to think about in the things we say and do in the things that we don't do that we should it in all way it all in some way comes back to not believing that

God is God and that he is not only the rightful king and ruler of our lives but also it's not believing that he's a good king ruler his rule is for our good for our flourishing which makes it doubly disastrous to ignore it sin promises much but it will never deliver God really does know best and so in this picture humanity is wrapped up with Barabbas he represents us yet here Luke is showing us that Jesus great act of sacrifice of substitution of Jesus becoming the sacrificial Passover lamb that is Jesus really and truly taking upon himself all of that blasphemy all of the insurrection that is ours that was Barabbas friends here's the wonder of the gospel there are myriad ways to make a mess in life but this substitution that

Jesus has made means that all of our dishonesty where we've been prepared to mislead others in order to make our lives a bit easier and doing so scoring the God of truth all the messes that we made in the area of sex all the one night stands all the pornography all the adulterous thoughts longings and acts that distort us and destroy relationships all of the sharp words and firm hands that have been lobbed at other people out of anger out of losing our inhibitions the times we've yelled at our wife or our kids the aggression that we've shown to people who irk us all of the words uttered in jealousy all the words that have been used to bring down to taint all of the relational chaos that we have caused because we love ourselves more than others and act selfishly all of the pride that wells up inside of us and spills over all the belittling all the boosting all the superiority and smugness that has reared its head in us all the ways all the dishonest tax returns the dodgy deals the theft all the ways we let the love of money affect relationships all the ways we neglected right responsibilities intending to our spouse and our children all the ways we deprived them of our love and service all the ways we deprived our church family of our love and service all the grumbling all the complaining all the bitterness that we uttered about our lot in life all the ways we pulled down into our despondency other people about church and all kinds of other things all the times we've not stuck up for those who are being mistreated or have mistreated others all the bitterness that lurks inside and flows out because we've been overlooked or because our life hasn't panned out as we wanted or hoped!

ways we've shied away from the wondrous good news of Jesus with others because we're worried about what it might do to us all the times we've covered our ears decided we're not going to listen to God all the times we've refused his outstretched hand of grace all of our idolatry where we've wrapped our souls around something that isn't God and seeking in it meaning and purpose and security all of those times all of those ways all of those things are placed on Jesus so that the guilt of all of them is registered to his account so that ours is wiped clean ponder that it isn't that the guilt is shrugged off and overlooked no God maintains perfect justice in the world the guilt and punishment are delivered but delivered onto the innocent one not to us and I know there will be

some some of us here who find this so hard to hear so hard to believe because we're conscious that we've made a truly awful mess we're tempted to believe that surely

[34 : 36] I've done too much to be forgiven but look at this picture verse 14 I find no guilt in this man Jesus and then verse 25 Pilate releases Barabbas the guilty one and delivers Jesus over to their will that is the great exchange at the heart of the gospel and it isn't that Jesus takes on some of our sin the stuff that isn't too bad no it's a complete change of place his innocence for our iniquity all of it so whatever it is that haunts you the things that you wouldn't ever dare to tell anyone else that you've done the things that would terrify you if anyone else find out those things are no longer yours you're no longer guilty before God for them if you're a Christian believer if you come to Jesus with the empty hands of faith and say

I have no hope in the face of all of this but Jesus then they're gone dealt with once and for all so there isn't the governor of Rome who says I find no guilt in you but it's the God of heaven who says to you and to me because of Jesus great substitution I do not find you guilty of any of the charges against you brothers and sisters hear that this morning because Jesus is the lamb without spot or blemish substituted for those who trust in him these are the words uttered over you in light of all that we've done including our most shameful things the verdict is I do not find you guilty of any of the charges against you innocent of it all because in my place condemned he stood the apostle Paul says the record of debt that stood against us with all of its legal demands this God set aside nailing it to the cross we'll see next week the various responses to the cross but suffice to say here the heart of the gospel is a great exchange a substitution that's the offer Jesus reaches out in grace he's doing so right now saying come to me humble yourself before me in the face of all of your mess and sin he says come to me in faith and repentance and that whole record of debt God sets it aside as it was nailed to my cross but friends that's the only way to be forgiven of these things and so will we believe him well Jesus says to us come to me you'll hear the words

I find no guilt in you no guilt let's pray Lord God truth be told we struggle to get our heads around the scandal of the cross that you could maintain perfect justice in this world rightly punishing all that's evil and yet provide the most beautiful and complete redemption for us grant us your help that we would never let our hands be so full of stuff that we would lose our grasp on Jesus help us this morning to rest in your pardon to trust your verdict of not guilty and so to live as people set free for Jesus sake and so grant us the sweet and tangible relief of knowing that our name is not now sinner but saint help us for we ask it in the saving name of Jesus Amen