

The Diagnosis of a Death: The Message of the Cross

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Date: 30 March 2018

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[0 : 00] We're going to read now from the scriptures from Luke's Gospel at chapter 23. You'll find it in the orders of service in the center pages. Let's hear the word of God.

And as they led him 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. And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him.

But turning to them, Jesus said, Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, Blessed are the barren and the wombs that have never borne and the breasts that never nursed.

Then they will begin to say to the mountains, Fall on us, and to the hills, Cover us. For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?

Two others who were criminals were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called the skull, there they crucified him and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

[1 : 16] And Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by watching.

But the rulers scoffed at him, saying, He saved others. Let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his chosen one. The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.

There was also an inscription over him, This is the king of the Jews. One of the criminals who was hanged railed at him, saying, Are you not the Christ?

Save yourself and us. But the other rebuked him, saying, Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of 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, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

[2 : 23] And he said to him, Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise. It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed.

And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. And then Jesus called out with a loud voice and said, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. And having said this, he breathed his last.

Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, Certainly this man was righteous. And all the crowd that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home, beating their breasts.

And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things. Now there was a man named Joseph from the Jewish town of Arimathea.

He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man who had not consented to their decision and action. And he was looking for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.

[3 : 34] Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut in stone where no one had ever yet been laid. It was a day of preparation and the Sabbath was beginning.

The women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments.

Amen. May God bless to us this his word. Well, please do open your orders of service at the center pages and the passage that we read together from Luke's gospel.

This account before us is taken from the second last chapter of the gospel of Luke. A gospel is an announcement of news, of great good news in this case about the kingdom of God, about the salvation that Jesus Christ brings.

And what better man to record this than Luke, the physician, a man devoted to clear evidence, clinical evidence, who spent his life observing symptoms and signs, diagnosing reality, and finding the explanation for the evidence in front of his eyes.

[4 : 59] That is what his gospel does. And what we have in these verses in front of us today is the diagnosis from Luke of the death of Jesus Christ.

Here's Luke giving us a doctor's report, if you like, on the Easter's events. That is, he's not just reporting to us accurately the events, which he is, but he is giving us the explanation of these events so that we also can grasp what all of these details actually mean so we don't misunderstand it.

It's possible to misunderstand it. The women of Jerusalem there in verse 27 misunderstood it, as Jesus himself said. Don't weep for me. You don't understand what this means.

But we must understand what the death of Jesus means. So let's listen to Dr. Luke's report and see what he wants us to be certain about. First of all, he makes absolutely plain to us that the death of Jesus Christ was a public event.

At the cross, we have a careful witness to real history. Luke tells us at the very start of his book that he wrote a carefully ordered account.

[6 : 18] And that's very evident in what we read here. Notice how he begins and ends with named men and with a group of women as his witnesses.

Verse 26, there's Simon of Cyrene from Libya, name and address noted. And at the end of verse 50, Joseph from Arimathea, a very respectable witness, a well-known man, a counselor.

Again, a very public witness. And then note the multitude of people in verse 27. And the women, he says, who saw everything. And again at the end in verse 49 and verse 55, this group of women who knew him, who'd been with him ever since his ministry began all the way back in Galilee, they followed verse 55.

They followed when his body was taken to the tomb and they saw the tomb and they saw how his dead body was laid. There's no chance that they mistook Jesus' body for another.

They knew him. Look at all the precise details there in verses 53 and 54. The exact day, the time, the exact place of the tomb and so on.

[7 : 28] A careful doctor's report. A careful witness to real history. There was no chance of a mistake. There was no mass grave along with other criminals.

There was clear witness to his specific burial. No chance of the body being swapped for another one on the cross as Muslims are taught to believe.

Quite impossible. No chance of foul play to concoct some sort of idea about a resurrection from the disciples. Why? Well, because the simple reason was not one of his followers was expecting any such thing.

Look at the last verse, verse 56. They went to prepare spices for a dead body to curb the stench of a rotting corpse. These are just a few of the details that Luke gives us.

If you look, you'll find many, many more. His report here is replete with detailed reportage. The two criminals. The exact place, verse 33, where he was crucified.

[8 : 30] Even the nickname of the place, the skull. Verse 34, the casting of lots for his clothes. That little detail. Verse 35, the inscription above his head and so on.

The soldier's actions. On and on. So many witnesses to this public event in history. In the light of that, you know, it is really astounding that so many people today believe that Jesus Christ wasn't even a historical figure at all.

There is mountainous evidence in the history books of the world that far outweighs virtually all the evidence for any other major figure in world history from that age.

Luke is just one of those who gives us such a careful witness to history in this precise and verifiable record of the events so that we can be certain that, as the Creed says, Jesus Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.

The death of Jesus Christ was a public event, a matter of history. And these words of Luke give us a careful witness to that history.

[9 : 45] But, of course, that alone does not make this a gospel, an announcement of good news. Of course not. Even if many are ignorant today, the fact that Christ died, well, any surely informed and educated person does know that.

But Jews know that and believe that. Atheists know that and believe that. That doesn't make them Christian. No, it is the significance of the death of Jesus that is all important.

The explanation of what these events mean. And that is what makes this a gospel. And that is what the report of Luke shows us right here.

So as well as showing us that it was undeniably a public event, Luke also gives us a powerful explanation. In the cross, we have not simply a careful witness to history, but we have a clear word to humanity, a word from heaven itself.

Now, if you read through the four gospels, you'll see that each of the writers has a particular style, just as different preachers have a different style. Those of us who come here and listen to our different preachers, we're all preaching exactly the same message, but we do it in our own way, in our own words.

[11 : 04] And that's just the way it is with Bible writers. And Luke is a writer who loves clarity. He loves careful structure. And he's also very interested in people, people of all different types.

Maybe that's his medical slant coming through. But we've already seen, haven't we, how many different people he mentions in this account. But look, I want you to look at his careful structure.

Do you see there's five paragraphs there? Now, the first two paragraphs and the last two paragraphs start almost exactly the same way, with a movement in time or in place.

So the first paragraph begins with Jesus being led away, and the second one with the criminals being led away. And the fourth paragraph begins with the darkness coming in. And the final one with Joseph taking the body away to burial.

And then in the middle, there's this little cameo, which is unique to Luke's gospel, the story about these two criminals. And in each of the four paragraphs, the first four paragraphs, there's a word, do you see in bold there?

[12 : 09] I've put it in bold, a word from Jesus himself, right at the heart of it. Obviously not in the last one, which is about his burial, but in the first four. And each of these sayings is unique to Luke's account.

So clearly he wants us to focus on these, because in Jesus' own words, we are being given an explanation, a clear word to humanity, a powerful explanation of what the cross means.

We'll come back to the little middle paragraph, but let's look first at the others, and see what Jesus himself is telling us. Look at Jesus' words there in verse 28, in the first paragraph. They tell us that in the cross, we see that God's punishment is real.

Weep not for yourselves. Weep not for me, but for yourselves and your children. That is Jesus' word to that generation who persist in rejecting the Son of God himself as their own king come to be their savior.

Now all through Luke's gospel, if you read it, you will find Jesus warning that generation of Israel so privileged in seeing with their own eyes in the flesh the Messiah, the Son of God, come to be their savior.

[13 : 27] and yet so perverse in rejecting the very cornerstone of God's kingdom over and over again. Seven times in Luke's gospel, Jesus warns them explicitly of wrath and judgment to come if they will not repent, if they will not recognize him as their savior and as their king.

Back in Luke chapter 21, he foretells a terrible coming of destruction to the city of Jerusalem and to their glorious temple.

And he says, Alas, in those days for women who are pregnant and for those nursing infants, for there will be great distress and wrath against this people.

Those are Jesus' words. And those are his words here. Again, look, verse 29 and 30. Better, he says, to be childless in that day than to have the added pain of watching your children suffer for your own sin in rejecting the Christ.

Better, he says, for mountains to fall on you than to suffer more of what is to come. It is a terrible word, isn't it? But that is the word of Jesus Christ from the cross about the judgment of God which is real and terrible.

[14 : 47] For all who will go on resisting his gracious rule and his gracious mercy as the only savior from their sin which is such an affront to God.

And friends, if you read the history books, you will see that everything that Jesus spoke about here did come to pass exactly as he said. In AD 70 under Titus, the Romans sacked and destroyed and burned the city of Jerusalem, destroyed its temple and wreaked terrible, terrible suffering and slaughter on the people.

God's punishment, God's wrath on those who hate him and who spurn his son. It is real and it is terrible.

And that's the clear word to humanity that Jesus Christ himself speaks from the cross. His warning, of course, was given directly to that generation of Israel.

But all through his ministry, Jesus makes absolutely clear that his words are also for every generation and for every person. Look again at verse 30.

[15 : 58] Just listen to the words that the apostle John saw in his vision of the revelation of the last day when Jesus Christ comes to judge this whole earth and to pour out his judgment upon those who have persisted in rejecting him.

Listen. He saw, he says, people calling to the mountains and the rocks fall on us and hide us from the wrath of the Lamb. You see, if the judgment in history on that generation on the rejection of Christ was real and terrible and it was, read the history books, if that is real, verse 31, Jesus says, when the green tree of hope of God's Messiah is still abroad in the world before the end, then how much more terrible will be the wrath and the judgment of God upon the rejecters of him when at last the time of mercy is gone and all that remains is God's coming judgment.

Jesus' own first words from the cross tell us so clearly that God's judgment, his punishment is real and terrible on human rebellion.

And we see that also in the dreadful judgment that falls upon the Lord Jesus himself as he, the green tree of life, bears the wrath of heaven itself on himself for all that he came to save.

But Jesus' warning can't be missed. If we will not have him as Savior, how much more does there await for us the terror of his wrath and his judgment on sin?

[17 : 42] It's clear word to humanity, crystal clear. If you willingly refuse and crucify the Son of God and don't weep for him.

Weep for yourself and your children because one day you'll discover what a terrible, terrible thing that is. God's punishment is real and terrible and it's unavoidable for all those who reject the Lord's Christ.

That's Jesus' first word from the cross. But there is another word that Luke recalls for us here in the second paragraph. Look at verse 34. He tells us that in the cross we also see that God's pardon is real.

That real forgiveness is possible even for those who put the Son of God on a cross. Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.

Astonishing words for somebody who is being unjustly murdered by brutal soldiers to whom Jesus spoke these words. And I don't misunderstand those words. It doesn't contradict or negate what he's just said about coming judgment because many there did know exactly what they were doing and were quite unrepentant about it and remained unrepentant.

[19 : 06] As alas did the bulk of the Jewish nation of Jesus' day. As I've said, what Jesus said about their judgment did come about. But his words do affirm that even amid the coming judgment of God on men's sin, there can be pardon even for the most terrible of sins.

for his very reason for coming was to call sinners to repentance, to forgive those who will repent.

For the Son of God has authority on earth to forgive sins, Jesus said. And that's why in Acts chapter 3, after Pentecost, the apostle Peter proclaims to all the people you acted in ignorance to crucify Jesus.

But now, repent. Notice, ignorance is not an excuse. It's culpable. It's sinful ignorance. But in God's mercy, he says, if you repent, pardon can be real even for you.

Because in Jesus' death there's a powerful word about forgiveness of sins. How does Jesus' death forgive sins so powerfully?

[20 : 22] Well, not in the world's mistaken way of power. Look at verse 35, by a spectacular display of saving himself and others physically. No.

To save people from their sins for eternity, Jesus must stay on the cross. He must pay the terrible price for their sins. Forgiveness that brings real reconciliation to a rupture in relationship that can never be free, can it?

We know that. It's always costly, terribly costly. You know that if you've ever had to forgive somebody who's sinned against you very greatly. It involves deep pain, terrible pain.

You have to bear that pain. You have to absorb that pain. You have to wrestle with the pain, with the betrayal. You have to overcome in yourself that terrible, terrible pain, else there will never be real forgiveness and reconciliation.

Forgiveness and reconciliation will never be real if you save yourself the cost. So it is with God in the great, great rupture that our sin has brought and the pain to his heart.

[21 : 43] God himself in the person of his son must bear that wrath, must pay the cost of our sins so that we might receive forgiveness that is real.

And because Jesus in his agony here resisted the crescendo of temptation to save himself, which he could have done, because he was obedient to the last, that forgiveness, that pardon of God is real and possible.

Only because in our place, just as in the Passover, a perfect lamb died and shed his blood. And because of that, we can have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

But that's what we see at the cross of Jesus Christ. Pardon is real. And that's because, as Jesus' last word there in verse 46 proclaims, that's because in the cross, God's plan and purpose is at last realized.

That's a cry of accomplishment. John in his gospel records Jesus also saying that. It is finished, it's accomplished. But here Luke records Jesus' words which are quoted from Psalm 31.

[23 : 01] They carry exactly the same meaning. King David there is proclaiming how God will deliver him from his enemies. So that his people will be blessed. Into your hands I commit my spirit, says David.

They scheme together against me. They plot to take my life, but I trust in you, O Lord. Be strong. Take courage therefore all you who wait for the Lord.

You see, he is saying I have done your will. I've been faithful to the last. I commit myself into your hands knowing that you will honor me and you will bless.

all of those who wait for your salvation. And Luke also records for us, you see, the affirmation, the vindication of his perfect offering.

A vindication that comes both from heaven and also on earth. You see verses 44 and 45. The darkness, the miraculous darkness that the prophet Joel and the other prophets had said would mark the great day of the Lord's judgment.

[24 : 02] and the temple curtain there, the curtain that barred sinful people from going into the holiest place, into the presence of God. It's torn in two. And all those repeated sacrifices of atonement that were needed always to enter God's presence, they're fulfilled forever in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

And God's glory now breaks out forever from Jerusalem to go to the very ends of the whole earth with his great salvation. God's purpose of salvation is at last realized, it's fulfilled in the cross of Jesus Christ.

And it's affirmed by heaven itself in these mighty miraculous signs. And it's affirmed also in the earth. Luke shows us verse 47, the centurion's confession.

Certainly this man was righteous, he praised God. And verse 48, in the people's conviction, they went away beating their breasts with shame, knowing that a terrible thing had happened.

Jesus had said back in chapter 22 of Luke's gospel, the scriptures must be fulfilled in me that say he was numbered among the transgressors. And here is the perfect son of God crucified between two criminals among the transgressors.

[25 : 24] And it tells us with certainty, utter certainty, that God's promise purpose has been realized at the cross.

And that although his punishment is real, and sin must and will be judged, that through his death for our sins, pardon also is real for every sinner who will repent.

And that's God's clear word to humanity at the cross. God's promise. That's what the careful witness of Luke to history tells us. And that's what makes his message a gospel, a word of hope and of joy and of wonder and of love because God has fulfilled his promise at last.

What does that mean for you and for me? Well, look at that central paragraph, the very heart of Luke's account of verses 39 to 43. Because there you see is where we see that none of this is distant from us, even though it is the great center of time and eternity, even though it's the great business between God and man, the great mighty purpose of God for the whole wide world being fulfilled at Calvary.

That's all true. But Luke's message is unmistakably that it is also and indeed above all for every single one of us. He shows us the cross is a public event.

[26 : 58] He's given us the powerful explanation from Jesus' own lips of what it means. But don't miss what he tells us right here in the center about the cross of Jesus as a personal experience.

In the cross he is telling us we, every one of us who will repent, can find a certain welcome to heaven. or we can reject it forever.

Look at verse 39. These verses give an extraordinary picture, don't they, of the great division that the cross of Jesus Christ forces on all people. One criminal rails at him, literally blasphemes him, while the other wonderfully receives him and blesses him as Savior.

Savior. The first criminal shows us, doesn't he, the pride of the autonomous man. No fear of God, despite his dire situation. Save yourself and us, he says to Jesus.

He sneers at him. Save my skin, he's saying, and I'll believe in you. He wants rescue, doesn't he, from the consequences of his sin. Of course, doesn't everybody?

[28 : 14] But crucially, he doesn't want rescue from the cause of his sin, which is his own rebellious heart. There's absolutely no sign of penitence, is there?

He's proud, he's scornful right till the very end. The great example of so many people who just want a God who will serve them.

A God who will give a get out of jail free card. A God who's like a fairy godmother. Heal my body, God. Sort out my relationships, God. Get me out of this mess, God. Anything but change my heart, God.

Change my evil mind. Such a common view of God, if people think of God at all.

But imagine if God did that. Imagine if he offered a gospel of absolutely no consequences for sin and selfishness. A God who said, well, live as you please, be as selfish as you like, and I'll sort it out so there'll be no consequences.

[29 : 16] Not ever. What kind of world would that be? Where all moral consequences are eliminated. Where the selfish human heart can reign freely and autonomously, doing exactly as it pleases, scot-free.

Well, that was the world, wasn't it? That the serpent offered to man way back at the beginning in Eden. And it turned out not to be paradise. paradise. In fact, it was the end of paradise on earth.

It's the world, isn't it, that gives us our daily news today. And all the things that happen all around us that make this world so dark. Think about the continuation of that forever and ever and ever.

Unrestrained. That's what the Bible calls hell. No, the salvation that Jesus offers on the cross is not that.

It's the very antithesis of that. Look at the second criminal. He came to see that. It seems that at first he was just like the first one railing at Jesus. Matthew's gospel tells us that.

[30 : 23] But somehow his experience of the cross at Calvary changed him completely. Was it Jesus' demeanor? Was it the prayer of forgiveness?

That it was everything that he saw and heard. But through the cross this man came to understand his own sin. Look at verse 41. He knew his own punishment was just and right.

And he made absolutely no plea to be saved from that. No prayer to save my skin. But rather, verse 42, to save my soul.

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Those words express the death of pride, don't they? Christ. And the dawn of real penitence as he confesses his sin, as he throws himself on the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And he received then and there a certain welcome into paradise restored in the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[31 : 27] Verse 43, today you will be with me in paradise. The cross, you see, became real. It became personal for him with all its power to save and he received absolute assurance of the pardon of all his sins, of acceptance with God, of admission into the kingdom of God.

God's Lord Jesus. You see what Luke's telling us, friends, as he writes this for us. He is saying the cross of Jesus can become, and it must become, a personal experience for everyone because it's through the cross and it's only through the cross that anyone can find a certain welcome to heaven.

salvation. And you can, even if your life has been lived in the utter blackness of sin and guilt, deserving punishment, not only from this world's authorities, but from the bar of heaven's ultimate justice.

And you can, even if you've got nothing to offer back to the Lord Jesus Christ in a life of service because your life is almost already at its very end.

If ever there was proof that Christ's salvation is by grace alone, here it is for everyone to see. Isn't that wonderful? There's somebody perhaps who does look back on a life that has been wasted, that has been ruined, that has left nothing but disaster until its dying moment.

[32 : 59] But in the cross you can find a certain welcome to heaven. Whoever you are and whatever you have done.

Not escape, notice, not escape from the pain of mortal suffering, not escape from the process of death, this man did breathe his last, but escape from something far greater, from the fear of death and from the terror of God's judgment on sin.

As the old chorus says, there is a way back to God from the dark paths of sin. There's a door that is open and you may go in. At Calvary's cross is where it begins when you come as a sinner to Jesus.

You may go in, Luke is telling us. But he's also telling us, friends, you must go in. You must go in and the only way in is through kneeling penitently at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ.

You can't enter his kingdom like that first thief, proudly, walking tall, unbroken, only bowed low in penitent faith, only knowing your own sin, only crying out, Jesus, remember me in mercy when you come into your kingdom.

[34 : 24] There were two guilty men crucified with Jesus, but only one of them was saved. And Luke means us to see that and to ponder that.

J.C. Ryle said, one was saved that no sinner need despair, but only one that no sinner might presume.

friends, Dr. Luke, in his diagnosis of Jesus' death, has given us so carefully the public witness to history.

He's given us so clearly God's powerful word to humanity in the cross of Jesus. But it's all because he wants you and me to have so certainly Christ's personal welcome to heaven.

It's true, none can presume upon the mercy of God. But it's also true that none need ever, ever despair of the mercy of God, whoever you are and whatever you've done.

[35 : 35] If you'll kneel at the cross of Jesus Christ and if you'll say, Lord Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Amen.

Let's pray. pass me not, O gentle Savior, hear my humble cry, while on others thou art calling. Do not pass me by.

Savior, Savior, Savior, hear my humble cry, while on others thou art calling. Do not pass me by.

Lord, in your great mercy, hear our prayers, prayers of every heart here this day. And remember us also when you come into your glorious kingdom of life.

For Jesus sake, Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[36 : 37] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.