

Jesus Died as the Son of God, Our Savior
Luke 23:26-56
Key Verse: 23:43

by Kevin Albright

"Jesus answered him, 'I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.'"

Why is the cross the symbol of Christianity? Because on the cross, we see Jesus' true heart and identity and the whole purpose of his life and death. Luke presents Jesus' crucifixion as a worship scene--a scene of prayer and promise. Let's see and hear Jesus on the cross with eyes and ears of faith, that he is the Son of God, our Savior.

Via Dolorosa (The Way of Sorrows) (26-31)

Luke does not describe some of the suffering of Jesus. The other gospels all tell us that before leading Jesus out to crucifixion, the Roman soldiers did two things to Jesus (Mt 27:26-31; Mk 15:15-20; Jn 19:1-3). First, they flogged him. Jesus was brutally whipped, like a guilty criminal, even though he had done nothing wrong. The lashes of the whip pierced Jesus' skin and Jesus' blood flowed down his back. It is said that some criminals died from this flogging. The next thing the soldiers did was they mocked his kingship. They put a royal robe on him, a staff in his right hand and a painful crown of thorns on his head. Then they knelt before him in mock respect saying, "Hail, king of the Jews!" They spit on Jesus and struck him on the head again and again with the staff. Handel quoted Isaiah's prophecy: "He was despised and rejected... a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief..." Why did innocent Jesus suffer like this? Isaiah also prophesied, "...he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." (Isa 53:3,5)

Look at verse 26. As the soldiers led Jesus away to be crucified, they seized a man, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. Perhaps Jesus was too drained to carry the cross and needed help. So this man was seized by the Romans and forced to help Jesus. This shows us the oppression of Rome--to force an innocent bystander to participate in this execution. The man's name was Simon, from Cyrene in northern Africa. Probably he was a big, strong man, who looked able to carry the heavy cross. Jesus had once said that to be a disciple of Jesus one must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow Jesus. Simon did this literally. Bible scholars say that this man and his family became Christians, real followers of Jesus Christ. So what looked like an unfortunate happening to him at first, became the turning point and most blessed day in his life.

In verses 27-31, we see that a large number of people followed Jesus, including women who were weeping loudly for him. Jesus was too exhausted to say anything. But he spoke at length ominous words to them. He said: "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then 'they will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!'" For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" Jesus did not want them to cry for him, for his crucifixion was no mistake, and it was not the end. Jesus told them to weep for a time coming when they would wish they had no children. Jesus quoted Hosea 10:8 that they would want mountains to fall on them and hills to cover them. It means that they would want a swift death. Jesus had already spoken several times about great suffering coming to Jerusalem. This happened in the year 70 A.D. when the Roman commander Titus destroyed the city and slaughtered the people. Jesus did not weep for himself. Jesus wept for his people and for disaster coming upon them. Do you weep? What do you weep for? Jesus wept for the stubbornness of men's hearts, for the judgment of God would fall upon them. Jesus is telling us to weep for our sins and for lost souls. Jesus wants us to cry out for mercy in humble faith, so we can rejoice in his salvation.

Calvary (The Place of the Skull) (32-49)

According to Luke, Jesus spoke three things from the cross. Two of the things he said were prayers and one was a promise. These words of Jesus reveal Jesus' heart and purpose and his true identity as the Son of God and our Savior.

First, "Father, forgive them." Two criminals were also led out with Jesus to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals--one on his right, the other on his left. The

Bible does not describe Jesus' crucifixion. It simply says "they crucified him." We know that nails were driven into Jesus' hands, probably through the wrist, to attach his body to the cross. Jesus was crucified between two common criminals. Mark tells us they were robbers (Mk 15:27). How humiliating and shameful for Jesus to be killed with two robbers! No one wants to appear in a police line up with other criminals or to be put in jail with other criminals. Yet this fulfilled Scripture. Jesus already quoted Isaiah in Luke 22:37 saying, "It is written: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors,'; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me."

Look at verse 34. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots." Luke records Jesus' first word from the cross as a prayer. Jesus prayed not for himself, but about others. Jesus' prayer was not one of revenge, but of forgiveness. He did not pray for their punishment. He did not wish God's wrath to fall on them. What is our natural response when someone hurts us? It is to hurt that person back, or at least to wish that they get hurt. Jesus did not respond normally or naturally. Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

How could Jesus pray like this? Jesus was living up to his own teaching. Jesus said in Luke 6:27-28, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. Jesus could pray like this, because he had love in his heart, God's love. Once, at a Pharisee's dinner party, a sinful woman entered and anointed Jesus' feet with her tears and perfume. Jesus proclaimed, "I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven--for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little." Forgiveness and love are related. Paul wrote in his famous love chapter in 1 Corinthians 13: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails." (4-8) With the love of God, we can forgive others and pray for their well-being.

Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Who was Jesus praying for? He was praying for the Romans, for they did not know that they were killing the Son of God. He was also praying for the Jews, for they did not know that they had rejected God's anointed and promised Messiah. Jesus was praying for all sinners, for sin blinds all people to the truth and to God's love. Sin leads us to reject God's love and to damage ourselves and others. So Jesus' prayer is for all of us, for "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Ro 3:23) Christ died for our sins. Do you know your sins for which Christ died? You must know your sins to know his forgiveness. Though you are living in sin, Jesus is praying for you: "Father, forgive him (her), for he (she) does not know what he (she) is doing." Jesus loves you. Jesus has hope that you and I will live godly lives in his grace of forgiveness.

Second, "You will be with me in paradise." The soldiers cast lots for Jesus' clothing. This too fulfilled a prophecy written by David a thousand years before Christ: "They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing." (Psalm 22:18) The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One." The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

The same taunt and challenge came to Jesus from three directions: from the Jewish rulers, from the Roman soldiers, and from one of the dying criminals. They all questioned Jesus' identity and power: "If you are the Christ, save yourself!" It was the same temptation that the devil challenged Jesus with at the beginning of his ministry: "If you are the Son of God...tell this stone to become bread...[and]...throw yourself down." It was the devil's last temptation for Jesus to save himself. The devil tempts us to save ourselves in any possible way; to make our lives easier; to deny faith and trust in the Lord. But Jesus taught quite differently. He said in Luke 9:24, "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it." Here again, we see Jesus following his own teaching. He did not save himself. Why not? It was to obey God's will and save us. If we live to save ourselves, we cannot follow Jesus, and we cannot save anyone else. Jesus came to seek and to save what was lost (19:10). When Jesus was born, an angel declared, "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord." (2:11) Even the critics of Jesus testified to a marvelous truth of Jesus: He saved others. This is why we call him our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. There is no other one who can save us from our sins. Peter later boldly declared to those who had condemned Jesus, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." (Ac 4:12)

One criminal hurled insults at Jesus. But the other criminal saw Jesus quite differently. He defended Jesus, rebuking the rude criminal: "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." This man stood on the side of truth. He tried to speak sense into his fellow dying criminal. Don't you fear God? After all, the man was dying. What other hope could he have, except hope in God? But he used his few words to insult Jesus. Perhaps he was hoping that Jesus would pull off a miracle and bring them all down from their crosses. He did not understand Jesus' purpose of dying.

The penitent robber, as we have come to call him, also knew something more. He said, "We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve." He admitted that he was a sinner, getting what he deserved. He did not justify or defend himself. He not only knew himself correctly. He also knew Jesus correctly. He said, "But this man has done nothing wrong." He knew that Jesus was innocent. He knew that Jesus was indeed the king of the Jews, who would soon establish his kingdom. So he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He knew that death was not the end for Jesus. He hoped that it would not be the end for himself either. So he appealed to Jesus very personally, "Jesus, remember me..." Why should Jesus remember him? What had he done for Jesus? The only thing he did for Jesus was to defend him while they were both dying. Would Jesus accept a request like that?

Look at verse 43. Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." Jesus accepted this man's request and promised that he would be with him that same day in paradise. The word "paradise" here refers to a heavenly garden, like the Garden of Eden, like the kingdom of God. The most important part was that Jesus would be there with him. The place was not as important as the Person he would be with. The place we are in is not as important as the Person we are with.

A tradition from the 4th Century is that this penitent thief was named "Dismas." We don't know for sure. Last week we saw that our spiritual name could be Barabbas, for Jesus took the punishment that we deserve. For the Christian, "Dismas" can be another spiritual name for us for he shows the way to be saved. First, we must acknowledge that we have sinned. Second, we must accept Jesus as the innocent Son of God, and King of heaven. Third, we must personally ask Jesus for forgiveness and mercy. Jesus promised that he would not drive away anyone who comes to him in humble faith (Mt 11:28; Jn 6:37). Rather, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Ro 10:13) Romans 10:9 says, "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Can you confess 'Jesus is Lord'? Do you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead? If so, then you will be saved. Like Dismas, the penitent thief, may we all say from our hearts, "Lord Jesus, remember me." (Please) Jesus promises repentant sinners who are about to die, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Let's also pray to share this wonderful promise of paradise with Jesus with others who need to believe it.

Third, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Mark's gospel tells us that Jesus was crucified at the third hour, which was 9 a.m. (Mk 15:25) Look at verses 44-45. It was now about the sixth hour [that is, noon], and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour [that is, 3 p.m.]. Jesus hung on the cross for six hours. For the last three hours, the sun stopped shining. It was not a solar eclipse, for solar eclipses do not occur at Passover time. It was a strange darkness. Another strange thing happened: the curtain of the temple was torn in two. For Jewish high priests, animal blood was necessary to enter the Most Holy Place. But through Jesus' broken body and shed blood temple sacrifices are no longer necessary. Hebrews 10:19-20 says, "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body..."

The moment of Jesus' death now came. Luke says in verse 46 that Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last. Jesus' last words were a confident cry of Jesus' faith and hope and of his love relationship with his Father, God. These words, from Psalm 31 verse 5, "into your hands I commit my spirit," were a common Jewish prayer of complete trust in the Lord. Jesus was not afraid. Jesus was not regretful. Jesus lived and died fully committed to his Father, God. Jesus died with no regrets for he accomplished his Father's will. Jesus' death shows that in death the righteous have peace and victory. Peace and victory comes to those who trust in the Lord--who commit their lives into God's hands.

The Roman centurion at the cross testified to Jesus' death. Seeing what had happened, he praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man." He knew that Jesus was innocent and had been wrongly killed. He knew that Jesus was no ordinary man. When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

Jesus was Placed in the Tomb (50-56)

Jesus died at 3 p.m. What would happen to his dead body? Verse 50 introduces Joseph from Arimathea, a Judean town. He was a member of the Jewish Council. This Council had condemned Jesus to die. But Joseph had not consented to their decision and action. Luke calls him a good and upright man, who was waiting for the kingdom of God. He was a man with spiritual insight and faith in Jesus. This Joseph went to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, and asked for Jesus' body. All four gospels identify that it was Joseph who buried Jesus. He took Jesus' body down from the cross, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid. It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin. The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.

Jesus was crucified under Pontius. Jesus suffered, died and was buried. It was not an accident. It was not a mistake. Jesus died to save us. Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3:18, "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God." Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Jesus promised, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Jesus prayed, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Only Jesus can save us. Only Jesus is worthy of our trust. Jesus wants all people to trust in him and be saved. Let's look to Jesus and listen to him and call out to him in faith. Let's pray that the whole world may look at Jesus, listen to him and call out to him to be saved. Let's share this promise of salvation in Jesus with all people. Let's share God's promise with the people around us right where we are, as our prayer that they too may be with Jesus in paradise.