

Christ Crucified (Luke 23:1-55)



The account of Christ's crucifixion is not written like modern journalism or biography. It is a straightforward factual account of what took place with only a few adjectives to describe the pain Jesus must have felt. There is a strange lack of appeal for the readers' sympathy or emotional response. Our faith must be based on truth rather than feelings. Where does the gospel of Luke put the focus on? Not on pain or emotion, but the people - how they responded to Jesus' death. Jesus suffered and died for us. How do we respond to Jesus' death?

There are four scenes here: (i) Trial - Pilate & Herod (Barabbas); (ii) Via Delarosa - Simon of Cyrene & the wailing women; (iii) Crucifixion - the two thieves; (iv) Burial - the centurion & Joseph of Arimathea. *Where were you?*

A. Jesus in Trial (23:1-12)

1. Jesus before Pilate (v1-5) - Jesus' suffering began in the religious centre, then moved to the political arena. On the way to Pilate, they changed Jesus' charge from blasphemy to treason on false accusations - 'tax evasion', 'claim to political messiahship' and 'stirring up an insurrection' (v1-2) because Jews did not have the right to execute people. Capital punishment was the prerogative of the Roman courts alone.
 - I. Pilate was a man of strange contradictions. He knew what was right. He had a good wife who warned him. He wanted to do the right thing. But he couldn't. Pilate was born a slave, but he bribed his way up the socio-political ladder. And when he became the governor of Judea he made serious blunders.
 - II. Blunder 1: He marched into the Jerusalem temple carrying the Roman golden shields that had idolatrous insignia, causing an uproar in the city. He started his post with bloodshed by brutally crushing the uproar. [Antiquities of the Jews (18.3.2)] Blunder 2: He financed the expensive aqueduct project into Jerusalem by robbing the temple treasury, causing another uproar. He crushed that uproar with another bloodshed by stationing his secret police in the crowd. They went too far, and it ended with the blood of the Galilean rioters being mixed with the sacrifices [Lk 13:1ff; Antiquities of the Jews (18.3.2)]. Rome then handed Pilate an ultimatum. One more blunder, he was finished.
 - III. Pilate saw a way out when the Jews told him, '*This man is upsetting the whole region starting from Galilee...*' (v5) Herod had jurisdiction over Galilee, so Pilate handed Jesus over to Herod in a hurry.
2. Jesus before Herod (v6-13) - Herod was a man who lived for sensual pleasure and material indulgence. He cut off John the Baptist's head because of a dancing girl, his stepdaughter. Now he wanted to see the 'famous magic tricks' from Jesus because he loved entertainment (v8). *Jesus had absolutely nothing to say to Herod.* How tragic. Herod's response to Jesus' silence was to entertain himself by dressing Jesus in a gorgeous robe and mocking and abusing Him, before sending Him back to Pilate.
3. Jesus before Pilate again (v13-25) - Pilate tried to free Jesus three times, but each time the crowd's shout became louder and louder. And Pilate caved in, *giving Jesus over to their will* (v25).
 - I. Pilate handed Jesus over to be whipped. The Roman whip studded with sharp metal pieces and bones would have ploughed Jesus' back, exposing the sinews and bones. They pulled out Jesus' beard by the handfuls (Matt 27:26). '*I gave My back to those who struck Me, and My cheeks to those who plucked out the beard; I did not hide My face from shame and spitting.*' (Is 50:6) This is the 3rd and 4th shedding of Jesus' blood.
 - II. Before crucifying Jesus, the Roman soldiers twisted the crown of thorns onto Jesus' head and beat His head with reeds, causing the thorns to be driven into His skull deeper (Matt 27:29). This is the 5th shedding of Jesus' blood.
 - III. Pilate went down in history as a coward. The Apostles Creed states, '*[Jesus] suffered under Pontius Pilate.*' No one names their children 'Pilate'. Pilate was sacked shortly afterward in 36-37AD. Eusebius wrote that Pilate committed suicide after he was recalled to Rome in 39AD. (Church History 2.7.1) *Some tried to discredit the Bible because no record of Pilate was discovered - until 1961 in Caesarea the Italian archaeologists found a stone engraved with the name 'Pontius Pilate'.*

B. The Journey to Golgotha (23:26-31)

1. Via Delarosa (way of suffering) - The path Jesus took to the place of the crucifixion was a long and winding road. It was the longest possible route to Golgotha. The death march to the public execution served as an example and lesson for everyone. Their crime was written on a board and placed over the crucified criminal for all to see. (North Korea and other nations in the Middle East still practice public executions.) Pilate wrote over Jesus, *'This is the King of the Jews,'* in an attempt to appease his conscience.
2. Simon of Cyrene - Jesus has been whipped and tortured. He hasn't eaten, drunk, or slept for many hours. He has lost a lot of blood and was severely dehydrated, and He fell under the weight of the cross on the way. Roman soldiers can force anyone to carry their load for a mile (1000 paces). But they probably were warned by Pilate not to provoke the already volatile crowd. So, they did not pick a Jew, but a foreigner from the crowd to carry the cross for Jesus. What a historic event for Simon from Africa, modern Libya.
Simon became an outstanding leader in the early church. He was 'Simeon called Niger', one of the major leaders in the Antioch church. He was the father of Alexander and Rufus who was 'chosen in the Lord.' Simon's wife (Rufus' mother) was Apostle Paul's spiritual mother (Acts 13:1, Mark 15:21, Rom 16:13).
3. The Weeping women - At this point, Jesus saw a group of women from Galilee weeping for Him. One emotion out of place for Jesus is pity. Jesus said to them, *'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves... If they do these things in the greenwood, what will be done in the dry?'* (v28-31) Jesus was an experienced carpenter. Carpenters didn't begin serious work until the wood was 'dried' or 'cured', or it will go out of shape later. Jesus was the green tree, but the days will come when the wood will dry out, ready for the Roman soldiers to do their serious work of destruction. This came to pass in 70AD when Jerusalem was destroyed.

C. The Crucifixion of Christ (23:32-46)

1. They led Jesus to the hill of Golgotha or Calvary, 'skull' in Aramaic and Latin respectively (v33). Crucifixion is the most diabolical form of execution devised by man. It leads to a horrible death with maximum torture. Nails are driven through the hands and feet (or 'wrists' and 'ankles'), and the bodyweight stretched the limbs further out, constantly sending shock waves of pain to the brain. To ease the searing pain from the tearing limbs against the nails, the victim would let go. This then caused the lungs to be stretched out, choking out oxygen. The victim alternated between the two positions – to suck in oxygen he pulled his body back upon the cross and hang tight, then let go to reduce the searing pain, grating his torn back against the wooden beam - until his muscles no longer could pull him back up and suffocating to death. Death came after 4-5 days. Jesus died after 6 hours. Jesus died precisely at 3pm as the Passover lambs were being sacrificed all over Jerusalem. *This is the 6th shedding of Jesus' blood.*
2. In the first 3 hours Jesus' concern was for others (9am-12noon)
 - (a) The soldiers – 'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do.' (v34)
 - (b) His mother – 'Woman, behold your son.' And to John, 'Behold your mother.' (Jn 19:26-27)
 - (c) The two thieves – Jesus was crucified between two criminals, so as to shame and condemn Him by association. They and others taunted Jesus with the same words the devil tempted Him in the wilderness. *'If you are the Christ, save Yourself...'* (v36-39). The devil was speaking again through the people. Jesus could have come down from the cross at any moment. Thank God, He didn't!
Incredibly, one of the thieves suddenly realised who Jesus was, as they hung on the cross. Their King and Messiah to come! Maybe the 'crime' written above Him, *'This is the King of the Jews,'* in three languages (Latin, Hebrew and Greek) hit him with the revelation. And he believed. The faith of this dying man was amazing. He rebuked the fellow criminal, then asked Jesus, *'Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.'* (v42) Jesus replied, *'Assuredly I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.'* (v43) 'Paradise' is a Persian word for 'palace garden'. This man knew he had absolutely no right to the kingdom of God, but that day he became the first person on the honour's list to walk in God's garden in heaven with the King Himself!

3. In the last 3 hours, Jesus prayed for Himself (12noon-3pm) - From 12noon to 3pm there was darkness over the land. Jesus died at 3pm as the thousands of the Passover lambs were sacrificed in Jerusalem and their blood was shed. Jesus died precisely at that moment. Jesus decided when, where, and how He would die.
 - I. Jesus was thirsty, hungry, and alone. He said, *'I am thirsty.'* (Jn 19:28)
 - II. *'My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?'* (Matt 27:46, c.f. Mk 15:34) God forsook His Son for the first time in the history of eternity as the accumulated and compounded sin of the entire human race - past, present and future - was transferred to Jesus Christ at that moment.
 - III. *'It is finished.'* (Jn 19:30) This was when the transfer of all human sin onto Jesus was completed.
 - IV. *'Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.'* (v46; c.f. Ps 31:5) Jesus prayed the last prayer which every Jewish boy learns to pray on his mother's lap before he goes to sleep. Then He 'exhaled' his last breath and died. At that moment, the beautifully embroidered veil in the temple, 40-60 foot high and many inches thick, was torn from the top to bottom by the invisible hand of God. The presence of God was no longer in the temple.
4. There were two ways of speeding up the death in crucifixion: (1) breaking the legs; (2) piercing the heart with a spear. Pilate thought it was strange that Jesus died so quickly. So, he ordered a soldier to pierce Jesus' side to make sure, fulfilling the prophecy of David (Ps 22:16-17; Ps 34:20). When a soldier pierced Jesus' side, blood and water flowed out (Jn 19:34). This is the 7th shedding of Jesus' blood. Why was this important? Research in the Trinity College in Dublin, tells us Jesus died from the ruptured pericardium of the heart. Jesus literally died of a broken heart when He was forsaken by God the Father.

D. The Burial of Christ (23:47-55)

1. The Roman Centurion – The man who was in charge of Jesus' crucifixion said, *'Certainly this was a righteous Man!'* (v47) He realised they executed an innocent man! *'This was the Son of God.'* (Mk 15:39) He was the first gentile to believe Jesus was the Son of God. Others went home *beating their breast.* (v48)
2. Joseph of Arimathea – He was a man afraid to publicly associate with Jesus when Jesus was alive. But he came out in the open when Jesus died. Joseph asked for Jesus' body so he could give Him an honourable burial. He laid Jesus in his deluxe tomb. Had Joseph not come forward to collect Jesus' body, His body would have ended up in Gehenna (picture of hell) where Judas' died. The women embalmed Jesus' body with spices and perfume (v56). They had to do it in a hurry since it was a special Sabbath day (Jn 19:31), either Wednesday or Thursday. In 28AD the first day of Passover fell on Wednesday.
3. Jesus died in obedience to the Father's will. He died for our sins. There was one person who was most impacted by Jesus' unjust trial and death. 'Barabbas' (son of the father) was the one who was sentenced to death by crucifixion. Jesus took Barabbas' place at the last minute. Barabbas went free. The cross was originally made for Barabbas.

Jesus took our place of punishment. We are 'Barabbas'. *Were you there when they crucified the Lord?*

E. Reflection

1. Jesus was the Saviour to His dying moment, pleading with the Father for the hardhearted people of Israel, and turning to the dying thief to save his soul.
Do you believe Jesus' love for you goes beyond your ability to understand?
2. Look at the response of each person to Jesus: (a) Pilate & Herod; (b) Simon of Cyrene & the weeping women; (c) The two thieves; (d) The Roman centurion & Joseph of Arimathea; (e) Barabbas.
Do you relate to any of them? Were you there when they crucified the Lord?
3. The cross on which Jesus was crucified was originally intended for Barabbas.
Are you aware that Jesus was nailed to the cross that was made for you?