

Osaka International Church

Luke 23:26-49

The Crucifixion – “The Ironies of Calvary”

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²⁶ As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷ A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. ²⁸ Jesus turned and said to them, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For the time will come when you will say, ‘Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ ³⁰ Then “they will say to the mountains, “Fall on us!” and to the hills, “Cover us!”” ³¹ For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?” ³² Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³ 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. ³⁴ Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. ³⁵ The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.” ³⁶ The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷ and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” ³⁸ There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. ³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³ Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” ⁴⁴ It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵ for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶ Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last. ⁴⁷ The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous man.” ⁴⁸ When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. ⁴⁹ But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

I think one of the major things that prevents people from believing in God today is that they feel like so many of their fundamental question about religion and the world we live in go unanswered by those religions. People feel as if there’s a disconnect between the fantastical things they hear about with regard to religion and how real life works. And as a result, there’s this belief that religious ideas about reality are unrealistic and fail to address deep human concerns in a meaningful way.

Now, I think part of the blame for this lands on a church that has maybe forgotten how to contextualise the Christian message in a way that speaks to our culture and people’s needs, but another is that people don’t take the time to really consider whether Christianity truly does talk about what people are really concerned with.

And what we’re going to do this morning is take one of the pivotal moments in the story of the Bible, and we’re going to look at how it satisfyingly and maturely addresses questions we may have about God and what this whole Christianity thing is about anyway.

So we’re going to take in this account Luke records for us about the death of Jesus; something the whole gospel has been leading to. We’re going to look at three aspects of the cross today that address some of our deepest questions. You could call these three things: **the injustice of the cross, the irony of the cross, and the power of the cross.**

1. The Injustice of the Cross (v 32-34; 40-41; 47)

- a. In the verses above the idea that keeps cropping up is the innocence of Jesus. **“This man has done nothing wrong.”**
- b. Now, if you’ve read the story leading up to Jesus’ death you’ll notice one thing come across very clearly: **it all seems so unfair**. Jesus is betrayed by one of his closest companions, and suffers horrible injustice at the hands of people who are supposed to tell the truth and provide justice. The Pharisees, people who are supposed to be the examples of religious honesty, and the Roman governor Pilate, who is supposed to deal out justice for the people, both condemn an innocent man because it suits them. Their greed, hatred and cowardice prevent them from doing what is right.
 - i. Just to focus this a little further, think back to the last few weeks: what has Jesus been doing?
 1. Healing the sick
 2. Restoring broken people
 3. Preaching words of hope and truth to people
 4. Elsewhere he’s been feeding the poor and challenging social wrongs
 - ii. Even the most committed sceptic of Christianity would agree: **this man has done nothing wrong**. Quite the opposite, he has “done all things well”. If anything he should be receiving honour and respect, but here he is being subjected to horrific injustice. Beaten, mocked, scorned and crucified with criminals.
- c. And that should, regardless of whether we call ourselves Christians or not, provoke anger or at least sadness at the injustice being done here. What is happening to Jesus is that he is being denied what is fair and right by his accusers. **Because that’s what injustice is, isn’t it? It’s being denied what’s fair and right.**
 - i. And we can relate to this. We’ve all come across injustice before, in both small and large ways. Times that we’ve done nothing wrong yet suffered as a result of another person’s lack of fairness. Maybe it’s happened to us, or we’ve seen it happen to a friend or loved one.
 1. Somebody takes the credit for work you’ve done.
 2. Somebody manipulates you in a relationship to get what they want.
 3. Somebody is discriminated against because of their gender or race, or class.
 - ii. If we were to list here all of the instances of injustice in our world we would have no time for anything else. It impacts us both on a national scale and a personal scale as well. Global injustices like dictatorships, poverty and ethnic cleansing, as well as the everyday pettiness or struggles we can experience. In the world we live in it’s impossible to escape such things. They all come around to us eventually.
- d. And it causes us to wonder **how there can be a good God in a world of injustice like this.**
 - i. Because we all believe in freedom and fairness. We believe in justice as a basic right for all human beings. But what we see in this world so often is the total reverse of that.
 - ii. And we come to the conclusion that if there is a God (and we don’t even agree on that often), he doesn’t care, or that he’s weak, or that he’s actively evil in allowing such things to happen.
- e. But I don’t think the crucifixion allows us to make such judgments of the God of the Bible. **In the Christian message, God draws near to a world of injustice and unfairness.** He becomes a man in one of the poorest communities at the time, an oppressed minority under a brutal military occupation.
 - i. And not only does he draw near, not only does he enter into the world of injustice we face. He suffers the worst it has to offer. Beating, mockery, rigged trials with false witnesses, then execution. And most of you will know that crucifixion was a method of execution reserved for only the worst criminals. Lord willing most of us will not even come close to this kind of injustice

(though we may well do), but Jesus is experiencing the worst this world has to offer.

- ii. So we cannot say that God does not know or care about injustice. If that were true, why then would he enter into it with us?
- iii. You see, **it's one thing for God to acknowledge injustice from up in heaven, but it's quite another to get his hands dirty and experience it with humanity.**
 - 1. Because how can God really care about our problems if he doesn't know what it is to suffer them? It's understandable that people sometimes think that because God is in a position of power that he identifies only with the powerful, but not at the cross. At the cross the Lord of the universe decides to identify with the oppressed and downtrodden.
 - 2. I hope you can see that we cannot look at the crucifixion and say that God doesn't care about the broken world we live in. He cared so much he came and shared in it with us.

So we can see how the cross answers a deep question of humanity about the injustice in our world by showing how God chooses to share in it with us. But there's another major part of this story, and it shifts the focus to this man, Jesus, to show us something about his identity.

2. The Irony of the Cross (v 35-39)

- a. Because the mockery that Jesus faces from all sides as he is dying contains a great irony. Can you see the challenge that is thrown at him over and over? "If you are the Christ, save yourself!"
 - i. To see the irony in this we need to look at what the Bible says the life of the Christ will look like.
 - 1. Let's turn to one of the most famous passages about the Christ in **Isaiah 53**. I'll read verses **7-12** (though the whole chapter is relevant to what we're thinking about here).

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ⁸By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished. ⁹He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. ¹⁰Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. ¹¹After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. ¹²Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

A lot of that looks very similar to what's happening here, doesn't it?

- 2. **By oppression and judgment he was taken away (v8)**
- 3. **He had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth (v9)**
- 4. **[he will] make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities (v11)**
- 5. **[he] was numbered with the transgressors (v12)**

- ii. And yet people are challenging Jesus, **“If you’re the Christ, prove it!”** I wonder if they would be saying the same had they Isaiah 53 opened in front of them.
- b. You see, the final mockery aimed at Jesus is the demand that he prove what he claimed to be: the chosen one of God. **What they fail to understand is that every detail of Jesus’ death had been foretold in great detail in the Torah. His death proves he is the Christ.** If you want to answer the question ‘was Jesus really who he said he was?’ then you have to look at the cross.
- c. But you see, the people around Jesus make an assumption about what God’s Christ should be like, and by doing so miss that the man dying on the cross is the Christ.
 - i. They’re basically saying ‘unless you show a great miracle right here, you’re clearly not who you said you are.’ They are demanding that he show them proof of his identity on their own terms.
- d. And that’s like a lot of people nowadays, isn’t it? They say, “If God came down and did a miracle right now, then I’d believe in him.” They put God to the test using their own measure of what they will believe.
 - i. I remember going into a local school in my town to run a discussion about suffering with some of the students, and what came across strongly from one boy there was how ridiculous it was that God didn’t just show up right there and then to prove to people that he existed. This student had a personal idea of the best way for God to show he exists and is powerful.
 - ii. Now, there are many problems with that argument, but I want to focus on one aspect of it this morning.
 - iii. The people here have demanded a display of power from Jesus. But aren’t the displays of power we respect the most the ones where a powerful person chooses not to use their power? To choose not to save themselves, even though they could, in order to save others? To sacrifice themselves? It takes great strength indeed not to use it when you easily could.
 - 1. At one time I was working for a company called the Japan Society in the UK, and one of my tasks was to research human stories about the bombing of Hiroshima during WWII for its anniversary. And as I read many sobering accounts, there was one of a group of Europeans that really touched me. These Europeans, many of them Christian, chose to stay in the city in order to help Japanese people during the devastation. These Europeans could have easily used their connections to escape the city to safety, but they chose to stay at great personal cost. In many instances they experienced the same horrors the Japanese did when the bomb hit. But they chose to experience those horrors because they cared for their Japanese neighbours. That takes immense courage. And in this amazing story we can see God does the same thing in Jesus. He chooses to experience our horrors, our suffering.
- e. But, even given what we’ve just been talking about, **Jesus is choosing not to save himself**, which if you think about his situation is very strange indeed.
 - i. If you were accused of something you didn’t do, wouldn’t you immediately try everything in your power to vindicate yourself?
 - 1. When I was at high school the only time I ever received a detention was when my mother forgot to return my school diary to my bag after checking it. When I got to school I was very quick indeed to let everyone know it wasn’t my fault. I even went so far as to get my mother to call and explain! It’s a silly example, but why was I so eager to have my name cleared? It’s because we want things to be fair, don’t we? It’s only natural. We want the truth.
 - ii. But here Jesus chooses not to clear his name directly. He chooses to be numbered with criminals and sinners. **He chooses to take on the guilt, even though it isn’t his own.**
 - 1. Make no mistake, Jesus himself says that at any moment he could command legions of angels to come and save him. But he chooses to

take his place amongst a doomed and broken humanity in order to rescue them. Just like the prophecies about the Christ say.

2. And by staying there on the cross despite the mockery, Jesus was (ironically) proving to all who had eyes to see that he was the Christ, God's chosen one. Only nobody could have guessed that this was the way he'd show it.
- f. Please realise this morning that this historical account of a man dying on a cross is the story of God's chosen Christ. **This man is the Son of God.** It answers, or at the very least begins to answer questions we have about this man Jesus.

But the cross doesn't just give us a general idea about a God who shares our injustice, marvellous though that is. It shows us what the cross achieves, how it addresses another of our deepest human problems: our separation from God. And this is the final aspect we'll consider this morning.

3. The Power of the Cross (v 42-46)

- a. There are two key parts in this last section to understanding this. They are **verses 42-43** and **verse 45**. In one we get this exchange between a dying criminal and Jesus. In the other we are shown the temple where a curtain is torn in two.
 - i. And in the middle of this seeming tragedy as Jesus dies, we're given a glimpse of something incredible and full of hope.
- b. In **verse 41** the criminal next to Jesus admits that he is guilty and receiving the right punishment for his crimes. Yet, he is told clearly by Jesus "Today you will be with me in paradise."
 - i. So, how can a guilty man go to heaven? We need to notice a few things about this man.
 1. **He doesn't ask to be saved from his circumstances, but his sin.** The first criminal asks to be taken down from the cross, and who can blame him? In his position we would probably be asking the same. But the second man asks instead to be remembered by Jesus. **He knows that his biggest need is not to come down from that cross, agonising as it was, but that he needed to be forgiven his sin.** That should tell us something about how serious sin is. It's more serious than crucifixion.
 2. Secondly, **this man also clearly understands who Jesus is.** Where everyone else is mocking Jesus saying, "If you are the King of the Jews", but this criminal seems to be certain that he is.
 3. Not only that, but **he acknowledges that Jesus is innocent.** He seems sure that he himself is guilty and deserves to be punished, but that Jesus is innocent and undeserving of this punishment.
 - ii. Now, could the reaction of this man merely be desperation? Possibly, but there's a quality of trust and belief here that this criminal displays which moves Jesus to give him an amazing assurance in the midst of what must have been an agonizing death.
 1. "Today you will be with me in paradise." Jesus is talking about being in the immediate presence of God in heaven. A criminal gets to heaven by acknowledging he has done wrong and asking for mercy from Jesus. And Jesus gives it.
 - iii. Jesus may be facing severe injustice on the cross, but he is also facing divine justice on our behalf over our sin. He is having poured out on him the righteous anger of God over our rebellion against him. And Jesus has chosen to do this so that men like the thief could be allowed into paradise.
- c. That's the first thing. But the second is related to it very closely. Look at **verse 44-45**, where we get several events recorded in quick succession. The one I want us to focus on is this curtain being torn.
 - i. If you've been here over the last four weeks you will have heard me talk about the problem of sin. It's the subtle enemy behind every story; it's the ultimate problem that each person who has met Jesus faces.

1. Actually, this problem of sin is all over the bible. I wonder if you've ever asked, "Why is the Bible so seemingly obsessed with this idea of sin?"
2. Well, there are several reasons, but the two being highlighted at the cross are that sin against God deserves severe punishment, because it's like high treason, and that it causes separation from God.
 - a. This curtain being torn is particularly important because to be joined in loving fellowship to our creator is quite literally what we were made for. Yet sin came in and spoiled all that.
- ii. And this thick curtain in the temple stood there in front of the Most Holy Place (where the presence of God was said to dwell) as a physical reminder of our status as outsiders before God. We could never go past that curtain, never be joined to the God who made us. Not without a sacrifice of some sort, and then only temporarily.
 1. **And here, finally, at the cross that thick curtain is torn in two. It's rent from top to bottom. Declared obsolete. Done away with.**
 2. And you don't have to be a university professor to understand what that symbolises. **Jesus dies and throws open the door of heaven for us.** His death paid for the penalty our sin demanded, and allowed us to come into the presence of God as his children.
- iii. The Son of God was forsaken so that you could be welcomed in to the only relationship that will ever complete you. The one you were made for. And you may not feel it this morning (though I pray you will), but that is an astounding answer to a deep, spiritual human problem. The way to God is opened through the death of Jesus Christ. The criminal understood it, have we understood it this morning? Have we taken it seriously?