

Thorn-Crowned Devotions

Week One

March 4-8

In this week, we think about some of the things that happened to Jesus on the way to Golgotha, the place of his execution.

The sermon delivered on March 3 focused upon Jesus' prayer to the Father in v.34.

The immediate context of that prayer is found in Luke 23:26-38. Each part of this is broken down into a daily reading. There are no questions included. You should come to class with your own observations on the passages and with questions you would like to discuss.

The Scripture quotes are all from the *English Standard Version (ESV)* unless otherwise indicated.

His Heavy Cross

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.

Luke 23:26

Part of the Roman sense of justice was compelling the criminal condemned to die by crucifixion to carry the cross piece on their back. Plutarch saw this as part of the consequences of crime and therefore as a deterrent. This 100 pound piece would then be hoisted onto the upright piece which stood ready at the place of execution, probably with the criminal attached by nails as it ascended.

Why then did someone else carry Jesus' heavy cross?

John lets us know that Jesus started carrying his cross to Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, but Luke, along with Matthew and Mark, are equally clear that somewhere along the way, the soldiers shifted that burden to a man named Simon (of Cyrene).

Why?

We are not told. We have to use our minds to infer what happened. Jesus had been up all night without sleep. He had been beaten prior to being delivered over to the Roman governor at daybreak. Pilate had him flogged. Even as strong as Jesus was, his body could not stand up to the extra weight in that condition.

Jesus was not a criminal, but he was made to suffer like one. Isaiah put this in perspective for us:

*All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

Isaiah 53:6

Weeping

27 And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him.²⁸ But turning to them Jesus said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.²⁹ For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’³⁰ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us,’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’³¹ For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

Luke 23:27–31

Luke records over a dozen incidents that none of the other Gospel writers saw fit to mention. He could have selected more given the vastness of the words and deeds of the Teacher. Here he recounts briefly the reaction of the women of Jerusalem and Jesus’ response to them.

The sorrows that Jesus carried were massive, but nothing compared to what was coming upon the people of the city of Jerusalem.

Green wood is hard to burn. The Fire Department did a demonstration of what happens when a Christmas tree is allowed to dry out for a couple of weeks. Dry wood makes a terrible conflagration that in moments has engulfed a room sending smoke roiling. The horror that is coming is terrible.

Jesus had to have help carrying this 100 pound cross piece, but this is happening to only one man. God’s wrath will pour out like fire from the sky igniting everything.

What will people do in those days? Jesus draws from Hosea 10:8 for his description,

The high places of Aven, the sin of Israel, shall be destroyed.

Thorn and thistle shall grow up on their altars,

and they shall say to the mountains,

“Cover us,” and to the hills, “Fall on us.”

Hosea 10:8

Hosea was writing about terror that was coming upon Israel when the Assyrians took the city. A similar thing was experienced when the Babylonians took Jerusalem and again when Romans took Jerusalem about forty years after Jesus’ warning.

John wrote after the Roman destruction,

¹⁵Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains,¹⁶ calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb,¹⁷ for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”

Revelation 6:15–17

What can we do to escape the wrath that is coming? Robert Robinson, in the hymn *Come, Thou Fount*, puts the truth this way,

Jesus bought me when a stranger,

Wand’ring from the fold of God;

He, to rescue me from danger,

Interposed His precious blood.

As Jesus was going along the road in Jerusalem, he could see the wailing of these women magnified thousands of time in the days coming. Because of this, he was going on to die so that we don’t ever have to face the terror of God’s wrath to come.

For Criminals

³²Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.³³And 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.

Luke 23:32–33

Jesus died a criminal's death. His placement between these two testified to all that here was someone who deserved to die in horrible agony under Roman Law.

With him on that hill were two criminals that did deserve to die for the crimes they had committed against others. One of them wouldn't admit it, but the other one did,

³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"

Luke 23:39–40

Mark and Matthew identify them as robbers. Little more than common bandits and "holdup men." They were not great patriots, but instead were willing to beat a man up and leave him half-dead in order to get his wealth (*Luke 10:30*).

The Roman method of crucifixion was cruel, but it was just to put these men to death. It is the terror of the manner of death that helped keep people under control.

Jesus, however, was no robber. He came not to serve, but to serve others and give his life as a ransom for many (*Matthew 20:28*).

He was dying in the place of robbers on behalf of robbers ... you and me.

The hymnist Charles Gabriel wrote,

*He took my sins and my sorrows,
He made them His very own,
He bore the burden to Calv'ry,
And suffered and died alone.*

We tend to like the idea of Jesus bearing our sorrows, but sort of skip over our own sins ... *my sins*.

It feels better to look down upon the robber as a sinner as though we are saints. The depravities of another makes our own failings seem trivial ... *to me*.

Turning the corner in Jerusalem and encountering Jesus hanging on the cross is to come face to face with one's own crimes out in the open, exposed for the death dealing things that they are.

Our indulgences are seen to have harmed other people. We understand that they were deliberate, self-serving rebellion against the love of God and opposed to compassion for others.

As we contemplate his death we stare in the face the almost inconceivable truth that this death was the kind we deserve. Some reject this not realizing that without Jesus worse awaits.

It also points out the true terror is being separated from God and all the goodness that is only found in fellowship with Him. When we indulge in sin, we are leaving not merely God's path, but also His side to walk alone into danger.

So that we wouldn't have to continue to exist under God's anger, so we could be freed from the darkness of loneliness into the glory of fellowship with the Father, Jesus died for our crimes.

Forgiveness Needed

And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments.

Luke 23:34

Like the previous saying, this was only recorded for us at this place in the Gospel. Unlike the previous, many early manuscripts and translations do not have this prayer. For this reason, many textual scholars do not believe it was original to Luke. Since only the original text is inspired, this becomes an important issue for faith and practice.

How do we know if it was original or not?

One key question to ask is, "Did someone take it out?" And as a follow up, we ask, "If so, why would they do that?"

One of the earliest complete New Testament copies is the Codex Sinaiticus, named because it was found at a monastery on Mt. Sinai. It originally included this saying, but that someone took it out. We know this because a later editor put it back in.

This indicates that as early as the middle of the fourth century of Christianity (c. 350 AD) scribes disagreed on whether or not it belonged in Luke's Gospel.

Someone might have taken verse 34 out of earlier manuscripts because the destruction of Jerusalem (68-70 AD) was seen by some to imply that God had not answered Jesus' prayer for forgiveness. They hold this in spite of the fact that he predicted this judgment (*Luke 23:28-31*).

Others suggest it has been added and was based on Stephen's prayer recorded in *Acts 7:60*, but although the sentiment is the same, the actual words do not match up. It is much more likely that Luke wrote both to show that Christians followed Christ.

The style fits that of Luke and does not in any way break the flow of thought. It should also be pointed out that this fits what we know of Jesus (*Matthew 6:12, 14-15; Mark 11:25*). It does point out a great need in our lives and the purpose for Jesus coming ... everybody needs forgiveness.

First, we need God's pardon because all of our sins are an affront upon His character. When we sin, we are not bearing His image and likeness to the world around us. This is idolatry ... presenting a false image of who God is.

Second, we need other's forgiveness. Our sinful nature causes us to act with callous disregard for the people who share this planet with us. Only a sociopath would claim that they have never done anything wrong to another human being. This also disrespects the image of God for it abides in each one.

Third, others need our forgiveness. Those who have wronged us are trapped by guilt until released. As long as we do not consider the debt to be paid, we hold on and so put a barrier between ourselves and loving fellowship, mutual support, and the ministry of God through that person.

In praying to the Father, Jesus was expressing that forgiveness, not upon their repentance, but upon their ignorance. He was starting his intercession for sinners on that final day ... the day when all was paid and true forgiveness could be justly extended.

Among the Mockers

³⁵*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!"*

³⁶*The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine³⁷ and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"*

³⁸*There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."*

Luke 23:35–38

Jesus was mocked while hanging there dying in our place. The rulers of the Jews taunted him with his powerlessness. Their unbelief drips from every word. They had rejected their only hope, their king.

The Roman soldiers mocked him as the King of the Jews. They thought he needed them to save him. A Jew could not be their Savior, only their victim.

Even the governor who surrendered to pressure and had an innocent man killed got his dig in at Jesus ... and the Jews. Literally, it could be translated, "*The king of the Jews ... this one!*" Do you see the sarcasm. The Jews are a weak, conquered nation. *This one* is their kind of king. Rome triumphs!

The people stood by watching. Some in grief at the horror of what was being done to their country, some questioning, *Is he the one?*" Perhaps these were waiting for God to rend the heavens with His angels and rescue the Messiah, if that was who he really was.

They failed to understand that Jesus couldn't save us, if he himself was saved.