



Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for April 5, 2009

Released on Wednesday, April 1, 2009

"Suffering unto Death"

Devotional Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Background Scripture: Luke 23

Printed Text: Luke 23:32-46

Luke 23:32-46

32 And there were also two others, malefactors, led with him to be put to death.

33 And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.

34 Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots.

35 And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God.

36 And the soldiers also mocked him, coming to him, and offering him vinegar,

37 And saying, If thou be the King of the Jews, save thyself.

38 And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

39 And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.

40 But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?

41 And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.

42 And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.

43 And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.

44 And it was about the sixth hour, and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour.

45 And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst.

46 And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost.

LESSON AIMS:

Facts: to explain the details that relate to the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus.

Principle: to show that the pathway to new life is through the cross of Jesus.

Application: to show that all who put their faith in what Christ has done will find new life.

INTRODUCTION:

Our first five lessons this quarter, all taken from Ezekiel, focused on the promise of new life. Each lesson considered aspects of God's blessing that still await fulfillment in the age when the Messiah will return to rule the world.

Of course, none of these promises can be fulfilled apart from the accomplishments of His *first* coming. Our second unit this quarter, therefore, is historical in nature. It directs us to New Testament texts that record Jesus' death and resurrection, as well as the spread of His life-giving message by chosen witnesses.

Ironically, this path to new life had to begin with His descent into death – a death Jesus did not deserve, since He is the Source and the Giver of life. But He endured the cross, with all its indignities, as the Substitute for every sinner. Apparently, none of those observing His death understood this. But one guilty criminal by His side got a glimpse of His true identity and begged for His mercy.

LESSON BACKGROUND:

Time: A.D. 30

Place: Calvary (Golgotha)

After more than three years of public ministry, Jesus returned once again to Jerusalem, but this time to die. After the Passover feast, Jesus departed to a quiet place to pray. That was interrupted when Judas, one of His close followers, betrayed Him.

Jesus was brought before a succession of authorities: the Jewish elders, Pilate, Herod, and then Pilate again. Pilate was certain that Jesus was innocent. To satisfy the people, however, Pilate offered to flog and release Jesus. The chief priests, leaders, and people refused this verdict. Instead, they demanded that Pilate crucify Jesus and release Barabbas - a man charged with murder and revolt. The pressure was so intense that Pilate eventually relented and granted the request.

Jesus had every reason to be bitter. He stood abandoned by His closest friends, falsely accused by the people He came to save, and unjustly sentenced to death by Roman officials. If ever God's people deserved wrath, if ever the ruling powers deserved to be smitten, it was right then. But Jesus did not respond in kind. As we pay careful attention to His response, we learn the superior power of the cross.

This week's lesson focuses on the death of Christ. New life was made possible by His suffering unto death on the cross. There was no other way for us to have new life than through this historic event two thousand years ago.

JESUS' SUFFERING BEGUN (Luke 23:32-34)

1. Why did Luke state that Jesus was crucified with criminals? (Luke 23:32)

Our lesson begins at the point when Jesus arrived at the place of His execution. He had endured unjust trials before religious and civil authorities. He had been turned over to the inflamed mob by a weak Pontius Pilate, who repeatedly declared that He was innocent. He had been abused by Roman soldiers and jeered by onlookers as He walked to Calvary.

Now, as Luke 23:32 recounts the crucifixion, we learn that "there were also two other,

malefactors, led with him to be put to death." "Malefactor" is a general word for a criminal, or lawbreaker. From Matthew and Mark we learn that these men were thieves. Luke's mention of them here in his narrative stresses that Jesus was executed as a criminal and was thus willing to take His place among the lowest of mankind (cf. Isa. 53:12; Luke 22:37).

The innocent, holy one of God is placed between *two* genuine criminals, as if He were one of them. This fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah, who said that God's suffering servant would be "numbered with the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12). That prophecy can be taken in a general sense, as Jesus is treated as criminals are treated. In a particular sense, Jesus is placed right alongside criminals literally.

2. Why did the Gospel writers not dwell on the physical details of Jesus' crucifixion? (v. 33)

Luke does not describe the process of crucifixion. He merely states that "there they crucified him" (23:33). The readers of that day were familiar with crucifixion and knew what it entailed. None of the gruesome details are included. For our part, we depend on nonbiblical accounts and archaeological evidence from Jesus' day in addition to the Gospels to grasp the full impact of crucifixion. One account depicts a man with forearms nailed to a crossbeam, with buttocks supported by a small shelf. He is turned sideways with knees bent so a large nail can be driven through both heels into the vertical beam.

But Luke and the other gospel writers did not give any of the details concerning the process of crucifixion. In fact, none of the Gospels dwell on the physical agony Jesus endured on the cross. They have a different purpose - to relate what it cost Him to bear the sins of all mankind.

3. What were Jesus' first words after being placed on the cross? (v. 34a)

Once on the cross, Jesus doesn't command legions of angels to rescue Him from pending death (Matthew 26:53). He doesn't call on God to rain judgment down on His false accusers. He doesn't even plead His innocence before onlookers or vow to avenge Himself. Instead, He asks God to "forgive."

Jesus' first words after being placed on the cross were a prayer for the forgiveness of His enemies. He may have included in this all who had a part in His death — most remarkably, the Jewish officials who so hated Him. But how could He say, "They know not what they do"?

Surely they had all the evidence that Jesus was their Messiah, yet they deliberately rejected it and concocted false accusations to condemn Him. In this they knew exactly what they were doing. But they had an even deeper ignorance of God's program and Jesus' place in it (cf. Matt. 11:25), and the apostles, like their Lord, later attributed their hatred of Jesus to this (Acts 3:13-17; 13:27).

Perhaps this is why Luke appears to intentionally leave open the identity of those for whom Jesus requests forgiveness. That may signify that the request for forgiveness is open to the thieves, the betrayers, the deniers, the accusers, and the crucifiers. It remains open for us.

Jesus' request for the Father's forgiveness is certainly an expression of grace. Forgiveness is possible because Jesus is dying on a cross to pay sin's penalty. This is God's way of putting an end to the hostility between himself and humanity. Jesus is absorbing all the hostility that the powers of this world can throw at Him, but more importantly He is absorbing the wrath of God.

In doing so, Jesus deprives human hatred and violence of their power. Hatred and violence thrive on bitterness and retaliation, but they wilt before nonretaliatory love and grace. This, of course, is what Jesus has been teaching throughout His ministry (Matthew

5:21, 22, 38–48; 18:21, 22; Mark 11:25; Luke 6:27–37; etc.). See Stephen's reaction on being stoned (Acts 7:60).

Jesus' request for the Father's forgiveness on "them" raises an important question: Did the Father honor Jesus' request and actually forgive "them"? We may answer with a confident *yes* if they repented. But that's a big *if* because God conditions His forgiveness on human repentance. Always.

4. What are some areas you have been wronged by others in which you should work toward forgiveness instead of revenge? How will you go about doing this?

Revenge is not an option for the Christian (see Romans 12:19). At the cross Jesus demonstrated that forgiveness is available to all. But we would often prefer to get even or to seethe in anger and bitterness.

Everyone has been injured by another in some way. It may be harsh words exchanged between spouses. It may be impatience demonstrated by parents to their children. Sometimes the hurts go much deeper. It may be that others have stolen from us, they might even have taken the life of a loved one. Having the attitude Jesus had is not easy, and it is not something we can do in our own strength. But the strength of the Holy Spirit is available.

5. Who cast lots for Jesus' clothing? Why? (v. 34b)

When criminals were crucified, their executioners had the privilege of taking their clothing. Thus, the four soldiers by Jesus' cross divided His garments among themselves. But according to John 19:23-24, they discovered that His outer garment was seamless; to tear it into four parts would ruin it. So they cast lots for ownership of it. This act was a direct fulfillment of prophecy (Ps. 22:18; John 19:24).

JESUS' SUFFERING COMPOUNDED (Luke 23:35-38)

6. What were the attitudes of the crowds and the Jewish leaders who stood by Jesus' cross? (v. 35)

Luke pictures the crowd standing by curiously, observing the crucifixion as a kind of entertainment. But the people were anything but passive. Both Matthew and Mark point out that those who passed by (in addition to the chief priests) insulted and taunted Jesus (Matt. 27:39-43; Mark 15:29-32).

In this they were merely following the lead of their rulers, who "derided him, saying, He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God" (Luke 23:35). Knowing Jesus' reputation as a miracle worker who delivered many from their ailments, they challenged Him to deliver Himself. Only this, they felt, could prove that He was the Messiah (cf. Ps. 22:8) who came to save humanity back to God. Seeing Him apparently powerless emboldened them to taunt Him.

In Matthew's account, (Matt. 27:42) the Pharisees who watched Christ die said, "He saved others; himself he cannot save." And they were right; He couldn't do both, so He chose to save you. Today will you accept His offer of salvation? 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

7. What was on the inscription over Jesus' head? Why did the Jewish leaders dislike it? (vs. 36-38)

The Roman soldiers could not resist joining the revelry. They were induced to mock Jesus by the inscription over His head stating the charge against Him: "The King of the Jews." The soldiers considered it hilarious that anyone should challenge Rome's authority over the Jews

by claiming to be their king. Crucifixion seemed to them a fitting fate for such a pathetic rebel. He could make good His claim, they said, only by saving Himself from the cross.

The superscription itself is reported variously by the Gospel writers. Based on a composite of what they record, it probably read, "This is Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews." But the heart of it reported by all is "the king of the Jews." This charge was written in the three languages most commonly used in Palestine - Greek, Latin, and Hebrew (John 19:19-20). Thus, all who passed by could read it.

This, indeed, was one of the charges the Jewish leaders had brought against Jesus (Luke 23:1-3). But now that it was displayed publicly, they felt insulted. Jewish leaders did not want it to even be hinted that Jesus was their king. So they asked Pilate to change it to say that He *claimed* to be their king. Pilate refused (John 19:19-22). He had compromised with them enough, and he would have the last word. The offensive superscription remained, and with it the Romans' implied sarcasm: "This is what happens to a Jewish king!"

JESUS' SUFFERING APPRECIATED (Luke 23:39-43)

8. What was the reaction of the two criminals crucified with Jesus? (vs. 39-40)

Luke now focuses on the two criminals crucified with Jesus. Whereas Matthew and Mark simply record that the thieves also ridiculed Jesus (Matt. 27:44; Mark 15:32), Luke notes a distinction between the two.

The first criminal, venting the bitterness of his soul in his hour of death, parroted the taunts of the Jewish officials. "If thou be Christ," he said, "save thyself and us" (Luke 23:39). Jesus' verbal response to this man is the same as His response to Herod: nothing. Of course, Jesus' nonverbal response is also the same: suffering crucifixion on their behalf.

The *other* criminal cannot remain silent. He acknowledges his and the other man's guilt as well as Jesus' innocence (vs. 40,41). In so doing, he becomes an example to us. When the world mocks our Lord, we must correct the impious speech. We cannot force people to discipline their tongues, but we can expose the error of their speech and provide a truthful alternative.

Whatever the reasons, this thief concluded not only that Jesus was unjustly crucified but also that He was Israel's Messiah. It is clear from his request that he knew Jesus had a kingdom to rule over (v. 42). He was expressing to Jesus his desire to be part of it.

The depth of this man's insight is remarkable. Concerning himself, he understood that he was unworthy and deserved only to be cast off by God.

9. How did Jesus answer the second thief's request? (v. 43)

This second thief exhibited the first recorded expression of confidence in the power of Christ over death. Until the resurrected Jesus shows himself to the disciples, they fail to see how His death can be anything but the end of the *kingdom* He has been proclaiming. But with great faith this humble criminal somehow sees Jesus' death as the doorway to the kingdom. The thief requested that Jesus remember him when He came into His kingdom.

But concerning Jesus, he understood that He was the divine Messiah whom death could not keep from His royal destiny. He further understood that this King could share His kingdom with anyone He wished, and he trusted His grace to include even a condemned criminal. The implied meaning of his request to be remembered is "Think of me with favor" (cf. Neh. 5:19).

The penitent sinner's prayer in the midst of shrill mockery must have refreshed Jesus' spirit.

After all, this was the reason He was suffering. So while He offered no response to the thief who taunted Him, He reassured the other one warmly, "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise." Jesus honored the fledging faith of the contrite criminal.

Many lessons could be drawn from this remarkable incident, but perhaps the most striking is the extent of God's grace. The dying thief had done nothing - and in that moment could do nothing - to earn God's favor. Yet Jesus, knowing his trusting heart, received him gladly. Ironically, He had also prayed for the forgiveness of His mockers, but He could do nothing for them because they had hardened hearts of unbelief.

Salvation is still by grace alone (Eph. 2:8-9), for all are unworthy of God's favor. He offers it to all, but only those who admit their unworthiness will enjoy its blessings.

JESUS' SUFFERING CONCLUDED (Luke 23:44-46)

10. What supernatural signs accompanied Jesus' crucifixion? (vs. 44-45)

Luke now focuses on the depths of Jesus' suffering and its conclusion. The three hours from the sixth (12:00 noon) to the ninth (3:00 P.M.) were marked by unusual phenomena. First, "there was a darkness over all the earth . . . and the sun was darkened." God was testifying of the spiritual darkness of the hour. The three hours of *darkness* is literal, as the reference to *the sun* makes clear. The prophets spoke of God's times of judgment as times of darkness (cf. Joel 2:1-2, 10; Amos 8:9; Zeph. 1:14-15), and on this day His judgment for the world's sins fell on His Son. No wonder Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46)!

Another sign accompanied the unnatural darkness—"the veil of the temple was rent in the midst" (Luke 23:45). Although there were several veils in the temple, this one was the huge, heavy veil that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place (see Exodus 26:31-35). Divine power ripped this curtain "from the top to the bottom" (Matt. 27:51). The Most Holy Place is entered only once a year, by the high priest on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:2, 29, 34). On this day, the sins of Israel are atoned for so that Israel can have a clean slate before God.

The tearing of this curtain seems to indicate how Christ's death reconciles God and humans with the result that the temple no longer serves this purpose. Hebrews 9 and 10 supports this interpretation. This signified that when Jesus died, the barrier between God and men was removed. Jesus' sacrifice opened the way into God's presence (cf. Heb. 9:7-12; 10:19-20). It also signaled the ending of the shadows of Old Testament ritual and their fulfillment in Christ (9:24-10:18).

11. What was Jesus' final cry from the cross? (v. 46)

Before dying, *Jesus* musters enough energy for one final cry that is surely heard by all nearby. Jesus' final words from the cross were a cry of triumph as well as a prayer: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." On the surface it seems as if He is simply surrendering His life to God. But the words He cries come from Psalm 31:5.

The theme of this psalm is the confidence of the righteous and afflicted that salvation is in God's hands alone, that God delivers the righteous from their enemies, and that God will repay those who exalt themselves. So while surrendering His *spirit* to God, Jesus is simultaneously claiming the type of victory that accompanies such surrender.

It is also worth noting that Jesus "gives up" His life. He doesn't try to fight off death, only to ultimately lose. He faces death and submits to it on His own terms. Death will serve Him in His plan. Jesus' early surrender also means that the Roman practice of dragging out the crucifixion as long as possible, as a statement of their power and authority, will not work

with Jesus. (We recall that Pilate is surprised at Jesus' relatively quick death; Mark 15:44). Rome does not take Jesus' life - He gives it.

PRACTICAL POINTS:

- 1.** Although wrongly treated, Jesus still set the perfect example of forgiveness (Luke 23:32-34).
- 2.** The spiritually blind cannot understand the spiritual workings of God (Luke 23:35-37; 1 Cor. 2:14).
- 3.** God sometimes reveals truth in unlikely ways and through unlikely means (Luke 23:38; cf. Num. 22:21-31).
- 4.** The unrepentant sinner makes demands of God; the truly repentant, recognizing his unworthiness, only makes requests (Luke 23:39-42).
- 5.** No true repentance ever goes unforgiven by Jesus (Luke 23:43; 1 John 1:9).
- 6.** Jesus and His Father are always in control (Luke 23:44-46).

CONCLUSION:

In dying on the cross, Jesus submitted to the will of the Father, overcame sin and death, and provided a model for us (Philippians 2:5-11). We will not change the course of world history the way Jesus did, but we may participate in the change He brought about. We will do so by imitating both the way He lived and the way He faced death.

Jesus beckoned His followers to take up their crosses and follow Him (Luke 9:23; 14:27). At that time they did not understand the full meaning of this invitation. It became clearer after Jesus was raised from the dead and showed himself to them. We can forgive one another numerous times because God gave His only Son in order to forgive us. We can accept the torturing of our bodies and the plundering of our possessions because this life and its treasures are not our ultimate hope. We can acknowledge with the apostle Paul in Galatians 6:14 that through Christ's cross the world has been crucified to us and we have been crucified to it.

These are great reminders for us Christians, especially during this Easter season. We tend to focus on Jesus' victory over death and the grave and forget the events of the days leading up to that first Easter. Easter cannot be truly meaningful without paying attention to the suffering of our Lord that brought us that Easter victory. Our lesson this week helps us put this in focus so that we truly understand that there can be no Easter without the cross.

PRAYER:

Father God, we thank You for the cross. Give us the same mind as Jesus who emptied himself of heavenly glory, who humbly accepted death on a cross, and who has been exalted to the highest place of glory. Teach us to walk in His steps so that we may truly live both now and forevermore, in Jesus' name, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER:

Take up your cross and follow Him.

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON:

Next week's lesson is "**Resurrected to New Life" (Easter)**. We will see that because

Jesus rose again, we can experience new life too. Study Luke 24:1-12.

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