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Luke 23:26-49

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At the Cross

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

Any serious study of the Christian claim has to be rooted in the cross. To accept or reject Jesus without a careful look at Calvary is like buying a car without examining the engine. Listen to these words from the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians, "For I delivered to you as *of first importance* what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures." "First importance" he says. There it is. It's almost too simple. Jesus died at the cross. He was buried. And, on the third day, He would be raised from the dead in order to grant us eternal life. In other words, what really matters is the cross. No more or no less. The cross rests on the time line of history like some multifaceted diamond. Its tragedy calls all sufferers. Its absurdity attracts all cynics. Its hope lures all searchers. And according to Paul, the cross is what counts. History has idolized it. It has despised it. Gold-plated it. Burned it. Worn and trashed it. History has done everything to it but ignore it. That's the one option the cross doesn't offer. We can't stand at the cross of Christ and not be affected. And so when we come to Luke's gospel the story of the crucifixion is told through the eyes of the participants in the drama. In rapid succession we survey the death of Jesus from the perspective of those who were there. In so doing we become keenly aware that the various responses around the cross are not unlike what we see today. Turn with me to Luke 23:26-49.

Part of the prisoner's humiliation was to carry his own cross, or at least part of it, to the place of execution. So as Jesus left Pilate's hall he was carrying either the cross or, at least, the crossbar that in itself would have weighed 75 to 125 pounds. Now Jesus was a carpenter. He was accustomed to heavy lifting. He knew how to put His shoulder to the task. But the whippings He had already endured at the hands of the Roman soldiers had taken its toll. So with arms extended wide, He began to reel like a wounded butterfly under the weight of the cross. And at some point He was unable to continue. So the soldiers drafted someone to carry the cross for Him. It's at this point in the story where Luke introduces us to the first individual's response. Verse 26 reads: "**And when they led Him away, they laid hold of one Simon of Cyrene, coming in from the country, and placed on him the cross to carry behind Jesus.**"

Simon was from the city of Cyrene, which is the

modern day city of Tripoli in Libya. He had no doubt saved and scraped his entire life in order to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem at least once in his lifetime. So here he was on the verge of this great experience and is suddenly forced to bear the weight of a criminal's cross. If that weren't enough of a burden, taking up the bloodstained cross would have rendered Simon ceremonially unclean. He would, therefore, be disqualified from partaking of the Passover meal. I think we can appreciate how Simon must have felt. What a terrible imposition! How disappointing! Simon had traveled 800 miles to Jerusalem to realize the greatest ambition of his lifetime. And here he was trudging the way of the cross. As Jesus put one wobbly foot in front of the other, humiliated Simon grudgingly bore the crossbar. But as reluctant as Simon must have been there is good reason to believe that he was forever changed by this encounter. Mark mentions, in his gospel, the names of two men – Rufus and Alexander – who apparently were his sons (Mark 15:21). Mark would not have mentioned Simon's sons had he not known them personally. It's also significant that Mark's Gospel, which lists Simon's sons, was written to the church in Rome. In Romans 16:13 (NIV) Paul writes, "**Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too.**" Simon's family may well have ended up as pillars of the church in Rome.

So what we have here is a huge surprise of grace during one of the most outwardly helpless moments of Christ's life. Once he had walked the path of the cross and gazed upon the eyes of Jesus, Simon of Cyrene knew he wasn't in the company of a common criminal. And he was forever changed by this experience. I think we can say that Simon points us to the fact that there are times that we are compelled to do something completely distasteful and yet, having no recourse, we're surprised to discover something of tremendous spiritual value and beauty. It's not unlikely that some of you are here this morning under duress. Maybe your husband or wife, your mother or father, prevailed upon you to come to church this morning. After all that's what people do on Sundays. And though you're here physically you're not quite sure of what to do with this "Jesus dying on the cross thing for the sins of mankind." Let me just caution you; one can never be too careful! The Lord may be lurking in the

midst of any unpleasant experience and you may find yourself being drawn into a relationship you never thought possible. This is what Simon models for us. Although reluctant to have any contact with Jesus, Simon was ultimately blessed. At the bloody mess that was Calvary, Simon discovered eternal life.

Others, however, responded with sympathy (vv. 27-31). **“And there were following Him a great multitude of the people, and of women who were mourning and lamenting Him. But Jesus turning to them said, ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. 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.” Then they will begin to say to the mountains, “Fall on us,” and to the hills, “Cover us.” For if they do these things in the green tree, what will happen in the dry?’”**

As Simon followed behind Jesus, a band of wailing women joined in behind them. These women were not the same as Jesus’ followers who had traveled from Galilee and would stay with Him to the bitter end. They were local women who had come to mourn. But these Daughters of Jerusalem were in no way prepared for what was to happen. Jesus turns to them and says, “Don’t weep for Me, but for yourselves and for your children.” What an odd response. Jesus, on the verge of a terrible death, was thinking of them. Go figure! These women were reacting in a perfectly normal way as they wept over the tragedy of His impending death. But as His remarks make clear the real tragedy is to misjudge who He is. The real issue went beyond what Jesus would suffer to what His death would mean to those who rejected Him. His future was secure, but unless they repented, theirs wasn’t. What this tells us is that Jesus is more concerned with repentance than sympathy. It’s not that Jesus didn’t appreciate their regard for His situation. But unless they repented of their unbelief, their plight would be so unbearable that they would cry out, pleading for the mountains to fall on them to take them out of their misery. Jesus tells them that it would be better to be childless than to be a mother during this impending time.

Verse 31 continues the warning saying, **“For if they do these things in the green tree, what will happen in the dry?”** This proverb is difficult to interpret. But most scholars seem to agree that this is like saying if Jesus, though innocent must endure death on a Roman cross, imagine what Jerusalem, which has compromised itself in so many ways, will have to endure. And we know that this prophecy became true in the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans in A.D. 70. This brings us face to face with a

truth that is repeated over and over in scripture, that man will answer to God. Because God created man with the capacity to make choices so also man must answer for what he does. But the very fact that Jesus warned them indicates that the possibility is still open for God to redeem the hearts of those who would turn to Him for grace. So we need to ask ourselves in light of this, what are the choices we’ve made? What, or who, have we chosen to follow? The truth is all of us have fallen short in our attempts to honor and please God. We’re all selfish and self-centered by nature. This is why God sent Jesus to die on the cross — to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. If we receive Jesus as Lord and Savior then God looks at us through His sacrifice on the cross. We are completely accepted and forgiven because of what He did. So judgment is a reality. Every one of us will stand before the throne of God and answer for what we have chosen. But in Jesus we are forgiven and completely secure.

Luke then turns the spotlight on the rulers and soldiers who were responding with mockery and shameless indifference (vv. 32-38) **“And two others also, who were criminals, were being led away to be put to death with Him. And when they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves. And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, ‘He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One.’ And the soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, and saying, ‘If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!’ Now there was also an inscription above Him, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.”**

Once they reached the place of crucifixion Simon was finally allowed to lay the cross down. Jesus was then thrown upon it. Spikes were driven through His hands. The crossbar was lifted upright and set in its socket. Jesus’ feet were nailed, probably with a single spike, to the post. The cosmic trauma was about to begin. Some women offered Jesus some wine mixed with myrrh, a kind of herbal drug, to help deaden the pain. But He refused it. He was determined to taste death at its worst — with a clear mind, even though it meant greater suffering for Him. This is what Jesus was enduring. He weathered the insults and abuses in complete silence. Yet at His greatest moment of agony, Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are

doing.” This has to be among the most amazing statements in all of scripture. If someone pressed a crown of thorns on your head, stripped you naked for the world to see, drove nails into your hands and lifted you up on a cross to die, would you pray that kind of prayer? In the soul of Jesus there was no resentment, no anger, no lurking desire for punishment on those who were treating Him in this way. What a great picture of the love of Christ. Jesus’ intercession here lays the basis for God’s offer of forgiveness. Certainly consequences follow our rejections of Him. But God’s extravagant love, as evidenced by the cross, shows us that any rejection needn’t be permanent. He says in effect, “I will forgive you, but I will only forgive at the cross.” He says, “I will fellowship with you only at the foot of the cross.” This is why we must come to the cross trusting in Christ alone to save us. How easily our pride gets in the way. We don’t like to admit that we have fallen short or that we don’t have the power to save ourselves. Only when we leave our pride at the cross can our hearts be open to receive God’s redeeming grace.

Of all the scenes around the cross that day, this one angers me most. What kind of person would mock a dying man? How cruel and insensitive to sneer at one who is laced with pain. And when we look at those who hurled insults and bartered for His clothes we see the pragmatists of the world – those who wield the power, set the rules, make the decisions and enjoy the perks. By their mock trials, their scourgings, their violent opposition to Jesus the political and religious authorities exposed themselves for what they were: upholders of the status quo, defenders of their own power only. The only kind of power these leaders were concerned with was that which served their own interests. They probably said things like “a little religion is not such a bad thing, just don’t let it affect your life.” And the soldiers were simply living for the spoils of the world. They refused to take a stand either way. They wanted only what was coming to them. Jesus challenged them. To them He was a great threat. Jesus was not their kind of Messiah, and they had no desire to follow Him in the way He demanded. They didn’t want a Savior God who would capture their worship but a “genie in the bottle” who would conform to their wishes. They didn’t want to be made righteous but successful. They didn’t want to be cleansed but satisfied. They didn’t want to give up anything *for* God but wanted *from* Him only the material advantages they coveted. And when they realized that Jesus offered no such favors, they had no more use of Him.

The same is true today. Jesus challenges our assumptions about the way life ought to be. He turns our management strategies and superficial rationales upside down. He calls us to look at the deeper realities. He points out eternal values and challenges the status quo.

He exposes so often the things we call pragmatic as nothing more than trivial nonsense. How these power brokers were threatened by this defenseless man on the cross! Even when they came to take custody of Jesus in the garden, they came with torches and clubs. How ironic! They carried torches and lanterns to find the “light of the world.” They brought whips and clubs to subdue the “prince of peace.” In the same way Jesus threatens the pragmatists of our day — those who think the bottom line is found in position, power or possessions, those who refuse to believe unless they see some measurable benefit for themselves.

Even the thieves hurled insults. Look at verse 39. **“And one of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, ‘Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!’”** As Jesus hung there on the cross, two criminals were also being crucified alongside. This was an intentional attempt to rank Jesus with robbers. Unwittingly, this fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy when he wrote, **“He was numbered with the transgressors”** (Isaiah 53:12). In Luke’s account we are told that only one of the robbers mocked Jesus. But in the other accounts we see that initially both men joined in the carnival atmosphere. Listen to Mark 15:31-32, **“In the same way the chief priests and scribes, were mocking Him among themselves and saying ‘He saved others; He cannot save Himself. Let this Christ, the King of Israel, now come down from the cross, so that we may see and believe!’”** And those who were crucified with Him were casting the same insult at Him.” The same account is given in Matthew 27. One mocked Jesus’ powerlessness: “Who needs a Messiah who can’t even save himself!” The other recognized another kind of power at work here (vv. 40-43). **“But the other answered, and rebuking him said, ‘Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.’ And he was saying, ‘Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!’ And He said to him, ‘Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.’”**

Finally, someone has defended Jesus. Just when it seemed as though everyone had turned away, a thief places himself between Jesus and the scoffers and speaks on His behalf. Perhaps he had begun to notice something different about the Lord. The impropriety of the mocking may have struck him like a stone. All of a sudden it occurred to him that instead of mocking Jesus they should probably be on their knees worshipping Him. Whatever it was

dawned on him that this person was indeed the Messiah, the Chosen One of God. And so he said in effect, "We're here justly. We deserve to die for our crimes. But this man has done nothing wrong." This thief owned his crucifixion as a just punishment. He knew he had no merit to which he could appeal for help. Such a clear awareness of sin is so refreshing to hear in our culture today. Most people live in some nebulous fog concerning their sin. They convince themselves their sins are noble, that their pride is "dignity," their willingness to forgive "character." They see themselves as basically nice people with some minor hang-ups or neuroses that are common to all of humanity. They rationalize and minimize man's terrifying capacity to make peace with evil and thereby reject all that is not flattering. No such haze clouded this man's vision. He feared God. He had come to possess the bankruptcy of spirit that Jesus requires. But he also saw the eyes of God in Jesus. He saw the ultimate sacrifice of love. And out of the depth of his own guilt, out of the realization of his own wasted life, he turned to the Savior and asked "Jesus, will you remember me when You come into Your kingdom." All he dared ask for was some blessing at some remote future day. And then he heard these unbelievable words, "You will be with Me in Paradise on this day." The word "Paradise" refers to a close relationship of great honor. At its root it describes a private but lavish garden, a place where a King would stroll with his closest friends. Jesus was giving the repentant thief the assurance that he would be among his closest companions in the eternal realm. More astounding is the immediacy of Jesus' response. The thief wouldn't have to wait to receive what Jesus promised. His faith had secured him an immediate place with the Lord. What a remarkable twist! In a sense, these paired thieves represent the choices that all of history has had to decide about the cross. Do we look at Jesus' powerlessness as an example of God's impotence or as proof of God's love? Obviously, in the repentant thief we see those in our day who recognize the truth about Christ. Perhaps even this morning this light has dawned on you; whereas, before today, you never really gave it much thought. There are so many questions and concerns that you have. You aren't quite sure of what it means to give your life over to Him. But you can't deny that you sense the truth in Him. And for you, today may just be a day of decision.

Luke then makes note that even the heavens joined in the discussion (vv. 44-46) "**And it was now about the sixth hour, and darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour, the sun being obscured; and the veil of the temple was torn in two. And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit." And having said this, He breathed His last.**" Luke tells us that Jesus' death was covered in darkness. Although it was 12 noon, darkness

engulfed the cross and remained there for three terrible hours. What did it mean? Well, in the Old Testament darkness was a sign of mourning. As Amos prophesied, "**I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight...I will make that time like mourning for an only son,**" (Amos 8:9,10 NIV). The cross was now draped in the sackcloth of darkness. This darkness also represented the reign of evil that Jesus had predicted at his arrest when He said, "**But this is your hour – when darkness reigns,**" (Luke 22:53 NIV). Satan was basking in what appeared to be his victory while devilish music swirled in the heavenlies. But what was actually happening? In those three hours all of humanity's sin was being poured into Christ's soul until He became sin on our behalf. As Isaiah had prophesied, "**He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely our grief's He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.**"

Can you imagine? Some of you may remember playing with a magnifying glass as a child. Remember how when you focused the ray of light on a leaf or bug or piece of paper it would begin to burn? In the same way our sins were focused, wave after wave, onto Christ's sinless soul. Or perhaps you can picture a beautiful young girl, an innocent virgin perhaps, being repeatedly raped by an ugly, greedy and demented man. If you can connect with the horror of what that experience would be like you're not even in the range of what was going through the soul of Jesus when He was made sin for us. Again and again during those three hours His soul recoiled as all our lies, our infidelities, our hatred, jealousies and pride were poured upon His pure and innocent heart. And He did so "That we might become the righteousness of God." What an awesome sacrifice!

Another event also coincided with Jesus' death. The great curtain of the Holy of Holies was ripped in two. This curtain was the most elaborate of the 13 curtains in the temple. It was woven with expensive yarns. Its function was to forbid access to the sacred place where God dwelled except once a year when the high priest would enter with a blood offering for the sins of the people. But now, under the darkened sky, this great curtain was slashed in two as if a great sword had sliced through it. That afternoon,

the way into God's presence opened for all. There was no longer a need for a holy priesthood to intercede on humanity's behalf. Unlimited access would become the lot of every person who turns to God through Jesus from this point onward. Under the remaining cloak of darkness Jesus uttered three phrases. Quoting from Psalm 22 Jesus cried out, "**Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?**" - which means, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mark 15:34) as He was now being separated from His Father for the first time. Then Jesus said, "**It is finished**" (John 19:30), meaning that sin's debt had been paid in full. And finally quoting from Psalm 31:5 Jesus cried out with a loud voice "**Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit.**" Jesus was praying the traditional prayer that every pious Jew offered before going to sleep. So it is no accident that Jesus chose this prayer before entering the ultimate sleep that is death. In so doing He was communicating His unwavering trust in His Abba Father. But we will miss the force of this prayer unless we understand the triumph from which it came. This was no ordinary death by crucifixion. Jesus was in control to the very last. He wasn't put to death; He intentionally gave up His spirit. And He did so not in pitiful resignation but with a shout of confident victory.

Finally we want to look at three different reactions in the aftermath of Jesus' death (vv. 47-49). "**Now when the centurion saw what had happened, he began praising God, saying, 'Certainly this man was innocent.' And all the crowds who came together for this spectacle, when they observed what had happened, began to return, beating their breasts. And all His acquaintances and the women who accompanied Him from Galilee, were standing at a distance, seeing these things.**" As death came to Jesus, life began to come to some who were there. When Jesus gave up His spirit, the centurion who commanded the death squad was watching intently. He had been there at the Road of Sorrows where Jesus told the Daughters of Jerusalem not to weep for Him. He had heard Jesus promise Paradise to one of the thieves crucified beside Him. He had witnessed the eerie midnight day; felt the chilling darkness that hovered over Jerusalem at that hour. And now he was looking at Jesus' face. There was something about those eyes. Despite the pain and sorrow they reflected peace. In spite of the ridicule they spoke of forgiveness. They didn't turn man's failure away in shame but rather absorbed it unto Himself. The centurion watched as the eyes of Jesus lifted and looked toward home. He listened as the parched lips parted and the swollen tongue spoke its last words, "Father into Your hands I commit My spirit." Luke tells us that after the centurion saw all these things, "he began praising God, saying, 'Certainly this man was innocent.'" Mark's gospel records that "**when the**

centurion, who was standing right in front of Him, saw the way (Jesus) breathed His last, he said, 'Truly this man was the Son of God'" (Mark 15:39). The cross had brought him into a sobering awareness that what he was watching was not a joke after all — that some ghastly mistake had been made. He suddenly became aware that Jesus was truly who He claimed to be — the Son of God. I love what Max Lucado writes: "If it is true that a picture paints a thousand words then (this Roman centurion) got a dictionary full. All he did was see Jesus suffer. He never heard Him preach or saw Him heal or followed Him through the crowds. He never witnessed Him still the wind; he only witnessed the way He died. But that was all it took to cause this weather worn soldier to take a giant step of faith. That says a lot, doesn't it? It says the rubber of faith meets the road of reality under hardship. It says the trueness of one's belief is revealed in pain. Genuineness and character are unveiled in misfortune. Faith is at its best, not in three-piece suits on Sunday mornings or at VBS on summer days, but at hospital bedsides, cancer wards and cemeteries. Maybe that's what moved this old, crusty soldier. Serenity in suffering is a stirring testimony. Anybody can preach a sermon on a mount surrounded by daisies. But only one with a gut full of faith can live a sermon on a mountain of pain."

Luke also saw hope for Jesus' countrymen. Look at verse 47, "**And all the crowds who came together for this spectacle, when they observed what had happened, began to return, beating their breasts.**" What this is saying is that they too saw the innocence of Jesus and went so far as to dramatically grieve His death. They shed tears. They didn't walk away from Calvary dry-eyed and unstirred. They didn't just straighten their ties and clear their throats. What this represents for us is that we can't look upon the passion of Christ with just our heads and not our hearts. It doesn't work that way. Calvary is not an intellectual exercise. It's not a divine calculation or cold theological principle. It's a heart splitting hour of emotion. We can't allow ourselves to walk away from Calvary's hill cool and collected. We have to pause. Take a look again. Those are real nails in His hands. That's God on that cross. And we are the ones who put Him there. The crowds knew it. They knew a great price had been paid. They knew who really pierced His side. But they also knew that somehow history was being remade. May we never be so educated, so mature, so religious that we can see God's passion, poured out on Calvary, without tears. That is what this group pictures for us.

Finally, Luke mentions Jesus' desolated followers. The men and women who believed in Him were "standing at a distance, watching these things." These followers are not gathering around the cross in hope; they are gathering in hopelessness. This is a picture of hopeless commitment. It was the women who stayed with Jesus and tried to minister to his dead body, bringing spices to anoint him. For the most part the men were long gone. And what this group represents to us today are those who believe in God; who believe in the record of the Scripture. They believe that God is there and that He works, until it comes to the exact moment of crisis in their own lives. Then their hope is gone. Although their love for the Lord endures they have no hope that He will act in the hour of despair. They assume the story has ended there. But a few days later they will be amazed to discover that it has just begun as they see God at work in a way they least expected. Suddenly Jesus would appear out of nowhere — He would be raised from the dead — and life would begin anew. And so it is for us.

A small boy was looking through a book of religious art one day. When he came to a picture of the crucifixion he looked at it for a long time, and a sad look came upon his face. Finally he said, "If God had been there, He wouldn't have let them do it." So it seems to us as well. It's not easy to look upon the agony of the cross. But if we are unwilling to we will never understand its significance. We will never appreciate the price Jesus paid for us. We will never understand the unfathomable love the cross reveals. That God was there all the time. That He willed it. And because of it grace touched the lives of Simon the Cyrene, the repentant thief, the crusty centurion, even the Daughters of Jerusalem and the crucifying soldiers, and thousands upon thousands since that day. So what is your response? When you stand at the cross and truly see Jesus for who He is and yourself mirrored through the various responses of those standing by, there is only one response you can honestly make. Like the centurion you must say in faith, "Surely this man was the Son of God." Our salvation comes at the expense of the cross and nowhere else. Are you trusting in Him alone? If so, hold these words close to your heart:

*When I survey the wondrous cross,
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.
Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ, my God;
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.
See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down!
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?
His dying crimson, like a robe,
Spread o'er His body on the tree;
Then I am dead to all the globe,
And all the globe is dead to me.
Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small:
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*