

The Heart of the Gospel: Gethsemane to the Burial of Christ

Chapter 13: The Way to Calvary

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Then delivered he him therefore unto them to be crucified. And they took Jesus, and led him away. And he bearing his cross went forth into a place called the place of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha. (John 19:16-17)

And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple from him, and put his own clothes on him, and led him out to crucify him. And they compel one Simon a Cyrenian, who passed by, coming out of the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to bear his cross. And they bring him unto the place Golgotha, which is, being interpreted, the place of a skull. And they gave him to drink wine mingled with myrrh: but he received it not. (Mk. 15:20-23; cf. Mt. 27:31-34)

And as they led him away, they laid hold upon one Simon, a Cyrenian, coming out of the country, and on him they laid the cross, that he might bear it after Jesus. And there followed him a great company of people, and of women, which also bewailed and lamented him. But Jesus turning unto them said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children. For, behold, the days are coming, in the which they shall say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck.' Then shall they begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us;' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?" And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him to be put to death. (Lk. 23:26-32)

After our Lord was condemned he was delivered over to the execution squad to be crucified. As we examine the walk to Calvary there are three areas that merit our attention. We will consider: (1) the historical details of the procession to the cross; (2) the humiliation and curse of these events; and, (3) Jesus' warning to the women of Jerusalem.

(1) Regarding the historical details there are a number of areas to consider. First, although we are not given all the details of the procession, it is likely that standard Roman procedure was followed. According to this procedure the procession would have been led by a centurion. Usually the centurion would carry a board specifying the nature of the crime involved. Or, the victim would have a placard around his neck describing the offense. In the case of Christ, Pilate purposely angered the Jews by writing "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (Jn. 19:19). Since the governor firmly believed that the Savior was a righteous Man, innocent of any charges, he simply states the kingship of Christ as a fact. Likely he did this as a type of revenge against the Jewish leaders who, he believed, forced his hand in the execution of the Nazarene.

During the procession each prisoner would be surrounded by four Roman soldiers. The soldiers were likely the same men who had earlier mocked our Lord in the Praetorium. The soldiers would prevent the escape of the prisoner and would prevent anyone in the crowd from attempting to secure the release of a prisoner by violence. The four soldiers were the execution squad for that particular prisoner. They would fasten the prisoner to the cross and later break the legs of the victim if necessary to hasten death. We are told in Mark's account that the soldiers took off the purple robe and put Jesus' clothes back on Him before they led Him away (Mk.

15:20). “It was normal for people to be crucified naked. Jesus’ garments will be removed at the cross (v. 24), but the return of his clothes for the march to Golgotha may have been a concession to Jewish sensibilities, which found public nakedness offensive (see M. Sanh. 6:3; Jub. 3:30-31).”¹ Although Mark says that the purple cloak was removed, he says nothing about the crown of thorns. It is very likely that the crown of thorns was not removed. During this procession our Lord was followed by the two “malefactors” who were to be crucified with him.

The normal Roman practice for procession to the site of execution at that time was to take the longest, most crowded road in order to attract the most public attention. Whether this was followed in the case of the Savior we have no way of knowing. “The way along which the Lord passed from the hall of judgment to the place of crucifixion is traditionally known as the *Via Dolorosa*.”² Although according to tradition this route ran from the Praetorium at the Antonia Castle to a place near the present church of the Holy Sepulchre, no one knows the exact path. Scholars are not agreed as to whether Jesus was convicted at Antonia or Herod’s old residence. Further, there are arguments for at least three separate sites outside of Jerusalem. “The precise position of this place is not known certainly and can only be conjectured. We only know (from verse twenty [Jn. 19:20]) that it was ‘nigh to the city,’ that it was ‘outside’ the walls of Jerusalem at the time of our Lord’s crucifixion, and that it was near some public road, as there is mention in the Gospel of them ‘that passed by’ (Matt. xxvii.39). So many changes have taken place, during the long period of 1800 years, in the boundary walls and the soil of Jerusalem, that no wise man will speak positively as to the exact whereabouts of Golgotha at this day.”³

Second, the place where the crucifixion took place is called the place of a skull, Golgotha (Mk. 15:22; Mt. 27:33; Jn. 19:17), or Calvary (Lk. 23:33). The name Golgotha comes from the Aramaic *gulgulta* (Hebrew *gulgolet*) which means “skull.” Thus, the site of crucifixion is called the place of the skull. Luke uses the word “Calvary” from the Latin *calvaria* which also means “skull” or “cranium.” The Greek *kranion topos* could be translated “skull” or “cranium place.” There are two common arguments set forth by scholars as to the reason for this name. One position is that the site of execution had skulls and bones lying around from victims of execution. This view is untenable because the Jews would not come near bones and skulls for fear of being rendered unclean. A much more likely reason is that the place of execution resembled the cranium, the top of a skull or a round, bare hillock. The site does not need to resemble the whole skull with eye sockets but only the cranium to be in line with the word Golgotha or Calvary. The idea that our Lord was crucified on a mount or cliff resembling the face of a skull is without Scriptural foundation. It probably was a small somewhat circular elevation of limestone. Ironically, the place of the skull is the location where the Son of God crushes the head of the serpent and conquers the kingdom of death.

¹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 639.

² Samuel J. Adams, *Life of Our Lord upon the Earth*, 549.

³ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:333. Merrill C. Tenney writes, “Two places have been claimed as the site of the Crucifixion. One is at the present site of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which was built in honor of Helen, the mother of Constantine, in the fourth century, after an attempt to identify the original site. The devastation of the city after the first and second revolts destroyed all landmarks or buried them so deeply under rubble that they cannot now be identified. The second place is Gordon’s Calvary, located outside the present wall, north of the Damascus Gate on the Nablus Road. It is now a Muslim cemetery on the brow of a ridge that encircles the northern wall. While the rocky eminence and the adjacent garden containing an ancient tomb seem to fit the description of the Gospels, it is doubtful whether either would have been used before A.D. 70. Until the location of the “Second Wall” that bounded the northwest side of the city in Jesus’ time can be settled, the exact location of Calvary will be debatable. The data of the Gospels are not specific; all that can be known is that the Crucifixion took place outside the city walls, not far from one of the main roads” (*The Gospel of John*, 182, footnote 17).

Third, we are told in John's gospel that Jesus went forth bearing His cross (19:17). The Romans required the condemned to carry their own instrument of death. Because the Savior was so weak from the scourging, He was only required to carry the cross as long as he was capable of doing so. Apparently, after a short period of time, Christ collapsed onto the ground or perhaps He was moving too slowly for the soldiers. In any case, the soldiers believed it was necessary to impress into service⁴ one Simon, a Cyrenian, to carry the cross (Mt. 27:32; Mk. 15:21; Lk. 23:26). Mark tells us that Simon happened to be passing by when he was ordered to help. Simon may have been a Passover visitor or perhaps was a part of the community of Cyrenian Jews that lived in or near Jerusalem (see Ac. 2:10; 6:9). Cyrene was located in what is now northern Libya, only ten miles from the Mediterranean Sea.

What is particularly interesting regarding Simon is that Mark identifies his sons as "Alexander and Rufus." The only reason Mark would identify Simon's sons is that they must have been known to the church at Rome. "It is most likely that Mark's gospel was first written for the church at Rome."⁵ In Romans 16:13 we read, "Greet Rufus chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine." Although we will never know with certainty, it may be that Simon was converted that day at Golgotha and his whole family became disciples of Christ.⁶

The statement in John that Jesus bore His cross and the synoptic gospels that Simon was compelled to bear His cross, raises two questions: What was the form of the cross? And, did Christ carry the whole cross or only the lighter transom or cross beam? There is a lot of discussion regarding the shape of the cross because the Romans did not always use the same form. Sometimes it was in the shape of an X called the *crux decussate* or St. Andrew's cross. At other times the shape of the capital T was used known as *crux commissa*, the Egyptian, St. Anthony's, or the Greek cross. There also was the shape of the small t known as the *crux immissa* or the Latin cross.⁷ According to tradition Jesus was crucified on the Latin cross. This is also the position of the vast majority of interpreters. The argument in favor of this view is that this form of the cross is the only form that would have allowed the placard to rest *above* the Savior's head which said, "This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (Mk. 15:26; Mt. 27:37; Lk. 23:38; Jn. 19:19). This superscription was written in Greek, Hebrew and Latin (Jn. 19:20) and was in plain sight of the Jews (Jn. 19:20). J. C. Ryle notes that it was common for Romans to use trees for crucifixion and thus a tree cut with two forked arms may have been used. Such a cross would be shaped like the letter Y. He writes, "[I]t is worth remembering that it was very common to crucify on a tree such as I have described, . . . the Latin word for 'cross-bearer,' means literally, 'forked tree-bearer,'—and . . . our Bible translators have four times spoken of the 'wood' on which our Lord was crucified as 'the tree' (Acts v. 30; x. 39; xiii. 29; 1 Peter ii. 24). The matter therefore is not quite so clear as some may think. . . ."⁸

⁴ "The verb *angarevein* has the semi-technical meaning 'to press into service' (cf. 5:41), which the Roman soldiers could require of any person they encountered" (Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 834).

⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, 361.

⁶ An ancient tradition regarding Simon of Cyrene that was favored by certain Gnostic and docetic heretics was that Simon was crucified in place of Jesus. Beasley-Murray writes, "[W]e should like to know how early was the notion, expressed by the Gnostic Basilides in the commentary on John, that Simon of Cyrene died on the cross instead of Jesus (cf. the Nag Hammadi evidence, *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, VII, 56, in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. J. M. Robinson [New York: Harper & Row, 1977] 332). The motive for such an idea is obvious, and the legend spread far and wide (eventually it became part of Mohammedan dogma, as it is to this day)" (*John*, 345. See R. T. France, *Mark*, 641, footnote 5).

⁷ See Samuel J. Andrews, *Life of Our Lord upon the Earth*, 550.

⁸ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:331.

Scholars are divided on whether Jesus carried the whole cross or just the cross piece.⁹ The Greek word for cross *stauros* “comes from the Gr. Verb *histemi* (root *sta*), ‘to stand,’ and originally meant an ‘upright pointed stake’ or ‘pale.’ Criminals were either tied to or impaled upon it. *Stauros* in the NT, however, apparently was a pole sunk into the ground with a cross-bar fastened to it giving it a ‘T’ shape. Often the word ‘cross’ referred only to the cross bar.”¹⁰ If only the cross piece was carried it would be slotted into an upright beam already erected at the site. Given the fact that Golgotha—the site of execution—was apparently regularly used by the Romans, the cross beam scenario is a distinct possibility. There is no way to know with certainty whether either position is true. If the Savior had to carry the whole cross (upright post and cross beam) we must keep in mind that the crosses used by the Romans were much smaller than the giant crosses of Medieval and Renaissance art. Scholars believe that the victims of crucifixion were only suspended a few feet off the ground, not the five or six feet of many paintings.

(2) As we examine the events leading to crucifixion and the crucifixion itself it is important to note the humiliation, shame and curse that the suffering Servant endured to conquer sin and death for us. There are a number of areas to consider.

First, Jesus was compelled to carry the cross, the instrument of His own torture and death. The Jews regarded these instruments of a bloody, prolonged death as detestable. They regarded any person who even touched these instruments of death as defiled or morally polluted. The rough wood would be stained by the blood of countless murderers and criminals. Our Lord was paraded through the streets of Jerusalem bearing the gibbet of execution to increase His humiliation and shame. The very streets of the holy city where God placed His special presence were stained with the sinless blood of the Son of God. The fact that the Savior started His journey to Golgotha all alone “stresses the fact that the Suffering Servant was being led into complete isolation.”¹¹

Second, Christ was led outside the city to be crucified. The author of Hebrews tells us that our Lord’s suffering outside the city is significant. “For the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach” (13:11-13). This passage alludes to Leviticus 16 and the day of atonement when propitiation was made for the children of Israel. After the clean animals were slain and their blood was used to make atonement, they were carried outside the camp. Then they were burned in the fire “their skins, their flesh and their offal” (16:27). God regarded the camp area as holy, but the area outside the camp was unholy and unclean. Therefore, outside the camp was the dumping ground for that

⁹ Many commentators see Isaac carrying the wood of the burnt offering as a type of Christ who had to carry the cross to His sacrifice (see Gen. 22:6).

¹⁰ G. F. Hawthorn, “Cross (Cross Bearing)” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 1:1037-1038. Regarding the history of crucifixion Hawthorn writes, “Death by crucifixion originated somewhere in the E. Alexander the Great seems to have learned of it from the Persians. Rome borrowed the idea from the Phoenicians through Carthage, and perfected it as a means of capital punishment.

The Romans reserved crucifixion, however, for slaves, robbers, assassins, and the like or for rebellious provincials. Only rarely were Rom. Citizens subjected to this kind of treatment (Cicero, *In Ver.* 1. 5. 66). The tradition, therefore, which relates the beheading of Paul, and Peter’s crucifixion accords well with this distinction between peoples.

According to Josephus crucifixion in Pal. was a most common sight (*Antiq.* 17. 10. 10; 20. 5. 2; *Wars*, 2. 12. 6, 13. 2, 14. 9; 5. 11. 1). The fact that two robbers were crucified with Jesus in Jerusalem tends to confirm this claim.” (*Ibid*, 1:1038).

¹¹ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, 425.

which was defiled or unclean. There was to be no more contact or fellowship between Israelites in the camp and the sin-laden sacrificial animals. That which was unclean must not come in contact with or have fellowship with the clean. As Pink notes: “‘Outside the camp’ was the place where the *leper* was compelled to dwell (Lev. 13:46), it was the place where *criminals* were condemned and slain (Lev. 24:14 and cf. Josh. 7:24, 1 Kings 21:13, Acts 7:58), it was the place where the *defiled* were put (Num. 5:3), and it was the place where *filth* was deposited (Deut. 23:12-14).”¹²

Christ, in order to be a sacrifice for sin, had to suffer outside the gate (i.e. the gate and walls of Jerusalem. The holy city where God’s special presence dwelt corresponded to the camp which contained the holy of holies). To become a curse for sin the Savior had to go to unholy ground, to a defiled place, to set apart His own people by His blood. By going outside the gate, Jesus identifies Himself with the curse, with the world in its unholiness. “[F]or Christ Jesus the moment in which He had to pass through the gate, His back to the temple, was the equivalent of a scourging from heaven.”¹³ To be a sacrifice for sin God had to cast our Lord outside the city, outside the realm of holiness, into the realm of the curse. “This is a sin offering. Please step out of the neighborhood, for He is unclean. *He has been made sin...* Christ is now being cast into fellowship with that which is unclean. That which is unclean and is thrown outside the camp... is thrown on the dung hill.”¹⁴ In order to receive the curse of God for sin and descend into the suffering of hell, Jesus had to go outside the gate to Golgotha, to the place of death and destruction. The spotless Lamb of God was cast away from the presence and fellowship of the Father into the outer darkness and terror of hell. “While we are unable to draw near to God because of our sin, God draws near to us in the person of his Holy One who on our unholy ground makes his holiness available to us in exchange for our sin which he bears and for which he atones on the cross.”¹⁵ John Owen identifies four major teachings that are connected to our Lord going outside the camp:

(1.) That he left the city and church-state of the Jews; whence he denounced their destruction as he went out of the gate, Luke xxiii. 28-30. (2.) He put an end unto all sacrificing in the city and temple, as unto divine acceptance. All was now finishing. (3.) He declared that his sacrifice and the benefits of it were not included in the church of the Jews, but were equally extended unto the whole world, I John 11. 2, John xi. 52. (4.) He declared that his death and suffering were not only a *sacrifice*, but a *punishment for sin*; namely, the sins of the people that were to be sanctified by his blood. For he went out of the city as a malefactor, and died the death which by divine institution was a sign of the curse, Gal. iii. 13.¹⁶

¹² Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954), 1186. “The high priest annually entered the Most Holy Place, sprinkled animal blood, and atoned for the sin of the people. Jesus became sin for us (II Cor. 5:21), bore the curse that rested upon us (Gal. 3:13), and according to the law was condemned to die outside the city gate (John 19:17-18). For instance, the son of the Israelite woman who blasphemed the name of the Lord had to be taken outside the camp, and the people were to stone him to death (Lev. 24:11-16, 23; also see Num. 15:35). Achan was taken outside the camp to the valley of Achor where the Israelites stoned him (Josh. 7:24-26; cf. Acts 7:38). Because of man’s sin, Jesus had to suffer outside the city gate where he endured God’s wrath. (Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Grand Rapid: Baker, 1984], 421).

¹³ Klaas Schilder, *Christ Crucified*, 31.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁵ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 579.

¹⁶ John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1855] 1980), 7:446.

Third, Jesus was crucified between two criminals. “Then two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and another on the left” (Mt. 27:38; cf. Mk. 15:27). As Isaiah prophesied, “He was numbered with transgressors” (53:12). Our Lord was placed in the middle of two nefarious criminals as if He “were ‘hand and glove’ with the vilest of the vile, and had been by far the worst of the three; as if He had been the chief of sinners.”¹⁷ “The two malefactors deserved to die, as one of them admitted (Luke 23:40, 41); but a greater load of guilt rested upon Christ; for ‘He bore the sin of many,’ and therefore he was rightly distinguished as the King of sufferers, who could truly ask, ‘Was [there] ever grief like mine?’”¹⁸ On the Roman cross of execution Jesus was given the supreme place of dishonor because He had to bear the sin of the whole world (i.e. the elect of every nation).

Fourth, the method of the Savior’s execution (crucifixion) is regarded by Scripture as a curse. Despicable criminals who were executed under the Old Covenant administration were suspended from trees both to intensify their punishment and turn God’s “fierce anger” from Israel (Num. 25:4; cf. Josh. 10:26; 1 Sam. 31:10). The law says, “[H]e who is hanged is accursed by God” (Dt. 21:23). Craigie writes,

The body was not *accursed of God* (or lit. “curse of God”) because it was hanging on a tree; it was hanging on a tree because it was accursed of God. And the body was not accursed of God simply because it was dead (for all men die), but it was accursed because of the reason for the death. To break the law of God and live as though he did not matter or exist, was in effect to curse him; and he who cursed God would be accursed of God. To break the law of God and incur the penalty of death, was to die the worst possible kind of death, for the means of death was a formal and terminal separation from the community of God’s people. Hence the use of this verse in Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians is very forceful. Christ took upon himself the curse of the law, the penalty of death, thereby redeeming us from the curse of the law. The manner of his death, crucifixion, symbolized dramatically the meaning of his death. His separation from the family of God made possible our admission to the family of God, because the curse of the broken law—which would have permanently barred admission—had been removed.¹⁹

The cross was an especially horrible experience for the Savior in that He was suspended between heaven and earth and rejected by God while He was alive. He experienced the suffering of hell, the outer darkness and separation from His Father while bleeding and dying on the cross. Our Lord endured the curse of the law, the full penalty for the sins of His people.

The cross (biblically defined) is the centerpiece of the gospel. It points us to a number of things regarding Christ’s suffering and death. a) Jesus suffered a judicial death. He was not just a martyr or an example, but was a sacrificial victim. The cross tells us that our Lord removed the curse, penalty and liability of punishment that we deserved as a result of breaking God’s holy law. The Bible says the soul that sins must die (Ezek. 18:4; Gen. 2:17); that sin results in separation from God (Isa. 59:2; Gen. 3:23-24) and the eternal agony of suffering in hell (Rev. 20:15). Our Lord endured hell, separation from God, the curse of the law and a bloody death on the cross that we might have eternal life. “He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death even the death of the cross” (Phil. 2:8). The Savior “made peace through the blood of the cross” (Col. 1:20). Jesus “wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross” (Col. 2:14). On the cross the

¹⁷ James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 592.

¹⁸ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 404.

¹⁹ P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 285-286.

absolute holiness and righteousness of God comes together with His amazing love, compassion and mercy. Sin is not ignored, overlooked or set aside but paid for in full by Christ's substitutionary sacrifice.

b) The cross points us to the intense vicarious suffering that our Lord endured. The essence of Christ's atoning work is in His suffering. God's law and justice require that sinners suffer and die. All the suffering and misery in this world and hell itself is the reward for sin. The sting of death is in the torments of hell. The second death is the intensification of the suffering that sin merits. On the cross our Lord satisfied the penal obligation of the law. His suffering delivered us from the suffering that we deserved. John Dick writes,

Of the various modes of taking away life by violence, crucifixion is probably the most tormenting. It is one of the many contrivances of barbarity, the object of which is to make the unhappy sufferer feel himself dying. He was fixed to the cross with nails driven through his hands and his feet. Besides the exquisite pain caused by the perforation of so many parts full of nerves, which are the instruments of sensation, great torment must have arisen from the distension of his body, the forcible stretching of its joints and sinews by its own weight. To this circumstance he alludes in the twenty-second Psalm: "I may tell all my bones" [v. 17]. "All my bones are out of joint" [v. 14].²⁰

c) The death on the cross was bloody. Jesus' blood was poured out upon the earth in order to save His people. This sacrificial act of a blood sacrifice was typified throughout the Old Testament. The rite of bloody sacrifice set forth the truth that the satisfaction for the guilt of sin could only be accomplished by the pouring out of the sinless blood of Christ. Dabney writes,

Until the Lamb of God came and took away the guilt of the world, God's requirement of bloody sacrifice was invariable. From Abel down to Zachariah, the father of John, in order that believers might pray, the smoke of the burning victim must ascend from the central altar. The Apostle Paul has summed up the invariable history in the words (Heb. ix. 22), "And without shedding of blood *is no remission*." But this awful rite, the death and burning of an innocent and living creature, could typify but one truth, substitution. Compared with the milder ritual of the new dispensation, bloody sacrifice was more expensive and inconvenient, yet God regularly required it. It is manifest that his object was to keep this great truth, penal substitution, prominent before the minds of sinful men...²¹

Jesus went to the cross and suffered unimagined torment because all the guilt of every sin committed by the elect throughout all history was imputed to Him on the cross. He suffered the severe pain of crucifixion, the horrors of the wrath of God, the buffeting of the Satanic hosts, the abandonment and hatred of His own people, the mocking of the crowds and worst of all the spiritual miseries of His Father's desertion. He suffered the most appalling torture, terror, dread, anguish and sadness to set us free from sin and guilt. He was overwhelmed with the curse so that we could have peace with God and be adopted into His own family. Our only hope in this life and the life to come is found in Christ crucified. "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Ac. 4:12).

There are some important questions that you need to ask yourself regarding the Savior's sacrificial death on the cross. Are you trusting in the redeeming power of Jesus' blood? Do you

²⁰ John Dick, *Lectures on Theology* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1864), 2:97.

²¹ Robert L. Dabney, *Christ Our Penal Substitute* (Harrisburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1985), 53.

believe that this precious atoning blood has washed away all of your sins? Are you relying on the death of Christ to reconcile you to a thrice holy God? Do you have the peace that surpasses all understanding, knowing that on account of the Son's saving blood God is no longer angry with you and that because of Jesus He loves you with a love eternal and unchangeable? Creature, do you want to be at peace with your Creator? Finite little man, do you want Almighty God to be your friend? You cannot have fellowship with God except through Christ's atonement. God has set forth Jesus to be a propitiation for our sins. Receive that propitiation through faith in His blood and have peace and fellowship with Him.

(3) As our Lord walked to Golgotha, Jesus spoke words of prophetic warning to some women who were mourning Him. This incident is only recorded in Luke's account: "And there followed him a great company of people, and of women, which also bewailed and lamented him. But Jesus turning unto them said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children. For, behold, the days are coming, in which they shall say, "Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck." Then shall they begin to say to the mountains, "Fall on us;" and to the hills, "Cover us." For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry'" (23:27-31)?

Regarding this event we will examine: a) the daughters of Jerusalem; b) the women's weeping; c) the Savior's words to these women; and d) a specific application.

a) These weeping and wailing women are identified as "the daughters of Jerusalem." This identification means that this group of women was not made up of Galileans and others who had come to the feast, but rather were city dwellers. They were women who lived in Jerusalem. This designation tells us that these women were not necessarily disciples of Christ who were crying over their Lord. It also helps us understand the why of the Savior's dire prophetic warning. Jerusalem would be a scene of horrors and misery in only one generation. "The following prophecy concerning Jerusalem was directed to those who would suffer most in the coming tribulation—the women of Jerusalem."²²

Although these women are not mocking Jesus but rather lamenting Him, there is no evidence that they were believers. In fact, the immediate context indicates that they were not Christians. Our Lord's prophetic warning did not apply to the disciples, for they fled the city and escaped its destruction (see Mt. 24:15-20; Lk. 21:20-23).

b) Luke says that these women mourned and lamented Jesus. There are a number of things that we need to note regarding the mourning of these women.

First, the words that are used to describe this mourning are quite strong. The first verb "mourned" (*kopto*) could be translated "to beat one's breast with grief" or "to bewail." The second word (*threnco*) translated "lamented" (KJV, NKJV, RSV, NASB) means to "mourn" or "wail for." "These two verbs are traditionally found together in the culture of that time, especially in describing women weeping. They wailed loudly and almost uncontrollably."²³ In antiquity and even in certain cultures today women express mourning in a very loud, dramatic manner. These women were raising their culture's death wail over our Lord because He was on His death march and therefore was regarded as one who was as good as dead. Some scholars believe that these wailing women had formed themselves into a group with the task of mourning for Jews who were condemned by the Romans for being revolutionaries. "The pious women of Jerusalem often went to mourn the executed, providing a narcotic drink to dull the victim's

²² Robert Stein, *Luke*, 585.

²³ Ralph Earle, *Word Meaning in the New Testament*, 78.

pain.”²⁴ That these women may have been a distinct group is supported by the fact that Jesus turned and faced them. This indicates that the women were standing together and were not dispersed throughout the crowd. Second, their weeping was not rooted in faith in Christ, but in hopelessness. While their weeping was certainly better than the mocking, it nevertheless had nothing to do with genuine biblical knowledge or faith and thus was rebuked by the Savior.

There is often an assumption in professing Christian circles that people who are quick to shed tears and are very emotional are the most pious. This view is especially common in Charismatic circles where often strong emotions are equated with the fullness or manifestation of the Holy Spirit. This passage teaches us that emotions are not a reliable guide in discerning the work of the Holy Spirit. There are emotions that flow from a regenerate heart and there are emotions that are rooted in ignorance, unbelief and even idolatry. “The dying of the Lord Jesus may perhaps move natural affection in many that are strangers to devout affections; many bewail Christ that do not believe in him, and lament him that do not love him at all.”²⁵ “‘Melting affections,’ says Burkill, ‘are not infallible marks of grace, even when they proceed from a sense of Christ’s sufferings.’”²⁶

This truth has been recently demonstrated by the film, “The Passion of the Christ,” which attempts to represent the last twelve hours of Jesus’ life. This Roman Catholic propaganda piece (which blasphemously purports to represent God incarnate, an explicit violation of the first, second and third commandments) brought multitudes of people to tears by showing the physical suffering inflicted upon their *representation* of the Savior. Did the fact that secular humanists, unrepentant homosexuals, Roman Catholic idolaters, atheists and Buddhists were emotionally affected by the make-believe images of cruelty and brutality to the Roman Catholic actor who was *pretending* to be the Son of God demonstrate true saving faith? Of course not! True, genuine biblical emotions must follow understanding and faith in Christ as He is revealed in Scripture. The women of Jerusalem were not weeping for the Messiah who was going to the cross to die as a sacrifice for their sins. They very likely (given our Lord’s response) were weeping for a man they viewed as a Jewish zealot or revolutionary.

c) Jesus speaks His last words before His crucifixion to these “daughters of Jerusalem.” Our Lord tells these mourners to do two things.

First, the Savior orders the women to stop weeping for Him: “Do not weep for Me” (Lk. 23:28). (“In negative commands the present imperative often means as it does here to stop an action already begun.”²⁷) This command raises the question. What possibly could be wrong with weeping for Jesus as He walks to Golgotha? He was a hideous sight: beaten, bruised, swollen, with a back opened up by the lash. What is wrong with sympathizing with such suffering? Our Lord corrected these women for a number of reasons.

As noted, a weeping without biblical knowledge and faith is merely a worldly spectacle. “These women were not weeping for the sins of their rulers in sending Jesus to the cross, for the sins of the crowd that did send Jesus to death, for the sins of their nation which could reject David’s son, for their own sins as daughters of this wicked Jerusalem.”²⁸ Such ignorant, faithless weeping may make a person feel better afterward subjectively, but it is meaningless and

²⁴ Craig S. Keener, *The Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 254.

²⁵ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:824.

²⁶ Burkill as quoted in J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, 2:465.

²⁷ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel*, 1127.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

accomplishes nothing. The Messiah is not looking for a mindless, emotional outburst, but for faith in Himself as Lord and Savior. “Whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (Rom.14:23).

Also, Christ is in complete control of His destiny and goes to the cross boldly to accomplish redemption for His people. “Unlike the women, Jesus is not overtaken by a fate for which he is ill prepared: in full obedience to His Father he goes to his appointed destiny, through death and to glory.”²⁹ Calvin writes,

These words do indeed show plainly with what exalted fortitude Christ was endured; for he could not have spoken in this manner, if he had not advanced to death with a steady and firm step. But the principal object is to show, that under this mean and revolting aspect he is still under the eye of God, and that wicked men, who now proudly triumph, as if they had obtained a victory, will not long enjoy their foolish mirth, for it will quickly be followed by an astonishing change.³⁰

The Savior makes it very clear that even in His supreme state of humiliation, as He steps into the abyss of spiritual suffering, He does not need anyone’s sympathy. He voluntarily offers Himself on the cross and He is fully aware that His suffering is unto victory.

Second, Jesus warns these women about their own fate. “Daughters of Jerusalem do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For indeed the days are coming in which they will say, blessed are the barren, wombs that never bore, and breasts which never nursed” (Lk. 23:28-29). The women are told to weep for themselves and for their children. This statement indicates that these women are not disciples, but are on the broad path that leads to destruction. The vast majority of Jerusalem’s population consisted of unregenerate Jews (Lk. 13:34, 35; Mt. 23:37, 38). Our Lord shows His concern for these women by warning them of the doom that awaits unbelieving, unrepentant sinners. People who are still in their sins need to start mourning over their sin and guilt. If they sob tears of repentance like Peter (Lk. 22:62), then their tears are not shed in vain. Matthew Henry’s application of this verse is right on the mark:

Note, When with an eye of faith we behold Christ crucified we ought to weep, not for him, but for ourselves. We must not be affected with the death of Christ as with the death of a common person whose calamity we pity, or of a common friend whom we are likely to part with. The death of Christ was a thing peculiar; it was his victory and triumph over his enemies; it was our deliverance, and the purchase of eternal life for us. And therefore let us weep, not for him, but for our own sins, and the sins of our children, that were the cause of his death; and weep for fear (such were the tears here prescribed) of the miseries we shall bring upon ourselves, if we slight his love and reject his grace, as the Jewish nation did which brought upon them the ruin here foretold.³¹

The reason Jesus gives these women to weep is that the days are coming that women who had never had any children would be regarded as fortunate. The Savior’s statement would be shocking and radical to Jewish women who viewed barrenness almost as a curse itself. Christ is setting before these women a dark future of judgment “in which the natural values of the present will be reversed.”³² Because the Jews have rejected and murdered the Messiah, God is going to

²⁹ John Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53*, 1137.

³⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 3:293.

³¹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:824.

³² John Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24*, 53.

turn their world upside down. The suffering Servant is speaking of God's coming vengeance upon Jerusalem that would be the climax of the Jewish-Roman war (A.D. 66-70).

The phrase literally translated from the Greek as "behold days are coming" is Septuagintal language (cf. Jer. 7:32; 16:14; 38:31) which points to the absolute certainty of God's judgment. Such horrifying events are to come upon Jerusalem that women would be much better off if they did not have to worry about caring for their children. Watching one's children starve to death in a siege would be a fate worse than being killed oneself. "Josephus reports that some mothers were reduced to eating their children during the famine in Rome's siege against Jerusalem, A.D. 66-77 (cf. Lev. 26:29; Deut. 28:53; 2 Kings 6:29)."³³ "Many of the women to whom our Lord here spoke might easily have been living forty years after, when Titus took Jerusalem, to see and experience the indescribable horrors of the siege, but it must have been mostly the generation of their *children* who suffered the destruction itself."³⁴

In recording this incident Luke is reminding his readers that our Lord had explicitly predicted Jerusalem's fall. "For these are days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! For there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people. And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations" (Lk. 21:22-24). He is also emphasizing that, even in His estate of humiliation, Christ is a divine judge. "Even now at his crucifixion Luke portrayed Jesus not so much as the judged but the Judge (cf. Acts 10:42; 17:31) who was fully in control of the situation."³⁵ The Savior was always very conscious that the cross was not a defeat; but rather, a victory.

To emphasize the terrible judgment coming upon Jerusalem our Lord quotes Hosea 10:8, "Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!'" (Lk. 23:30). The wrath of the Lamb and agony of divine judgment will cause the people to call upon the mountains and hills to cover them, to crush them and put them out of their misery. This is a statement of the utmost despair. They would rather be swallowed up by the earth than suffer the long, drawn-out, lingering torments of God's retribution. The daily and continuing horrors of the siege will cause the people to long for death. "Christ taught by these words that the Jews would at length feel that they had made war, not with a mortal man, but with God. Thus shall the enemies of God reap the just reward of their impious rage, when they who formerly dared even to attack heaven, shall in vain desire to employ the earth as a shield against his vengeance."³⁶ This aspect is brought out in Revelation 6:16 where the wicked call upon the mountains and rocks saying, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!" These daughters of Jerusalem needed to understand that the cross would lead to the empty tomb; that the bloodied, disfigured, half-dead Man before them would soon ascend to the throne of God and rule over all nations. The suffering servant was about to become the all-powerful King over kings.

Jesus supports His prophecy with a proverbial sounding statement about green and dry wood. "For if they do these things in the green wood, what will be done in the dry" (Lk. 23:31)? The adjective translated green (*hygros*) literally means "wet or moist." Our Lord's saying presupposes the use of fire as a symbol of judgment. The vast majority of interpreters believe that the moist, green wood refers to the Savior, while the dried out wood refers to apostate Israel.

³³ Craig S. Keener, *The Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 254.

³⁴ Alfred Nevin, *Popular Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke*, 660.

³⁵ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, 586.

³⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 3:294.

The point is that if God did not spare His only begotten Son who was perfectly righteous (and thus moist) and did not deserve to be burned (i.e. crucified and killed); then, will not the divine judgment fall upon the Jewish nation which is unbelieving, wicked and apostate (and thus dry) and is ready for the fire? “If *they* (that is the Romans) treat me who am *innocent* so cruelly, what will be done to the GUILTY?”³⁷ This proverb emphasizes the inevitability of the coming judgment and its severity. If the Jews do not call upon Christ as their Lord and Savior, then they will call upon the mountains to cover them.

d) Jesus’ words to the daughters of Jerusalem tell us something very important about the preaching of the gospel. While the word “gospel” means “good news” we must not forget that, to those who refuse to repent and turn to Christ, the gospel reveals the justice and wrath of God. As Paul says, “For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life” (2 Cor. 2:15-16).

The gospel is never preached in vain. It leads to either life or death. To those who neglect it and refuse to receive it, its proclamation is death. “He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (Jn. 3:36). Hodge writes,

As Christ is to some a tried corner stone, elect and precious, the rock of their salvation, to others he is a stone of offence. 1 Pet. 2, 7. 8. So the gospel and its ministers are the cause of life to some, and of death to others, and to all they are either the one or the other. The word of God is quick and powerful either to save or to destroy. It cannot be neutral. If it does not save, it destroys. “This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light,” John 3, 19. “If I had not come and spoken unto them they had not had sin,” John 15, 22. If a man rejects the gospel, it had been far better for him never to have heard it. It will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for him.³⁸

In our day many churches adhere to the idea that the gospel must be made as inoffensive as possible if people are to make a profession of faith and join the local church. Therefore, crucial biblical doctrines such as sin, judgment and hell are either greatly down-played or ignored altogether. Our Lord’s statement to the women of Jerusalem completely refutes all such thinking. While it is true that Jesus preached mercy, pardon, love and forgiveness, He also preached justice, judgment and wrath. The Savior spoke more about hell and its terrors than the prophets and apostles combined. In fact, the most terrifying imagery and detailed descriptions of hell are found in the discourses of the Redeemer. The gospel cannot be properly preached or understood apart from the doctrine of God, the righteousness of the moral law and the consequences of breaking it. Therefore, when Paul witnessed to Felix “he reasoned about righteousness, self control, and the judgment to come” (Ac. 24:25). When the apostle preached the gospel to the Athenians he said, “God...now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He had ordained” (Ac. 17:30-31). We never see Christ or the apostles soft-pedaling the gospel as another pop-psychology gimmick, a smart lifestyle choice or a path to health, wealth and happiness.

³⁷ Alfred Nevin, *Popular Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke*, 661.

³⁸ Charles Hodge, *I & II Corinthians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1857, 59] 1974), 422.

The gospel includes the love and mercy of God and also the justice and holiness of God. “See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven.... For our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:25, 29). J. C. Ryle writes,

There is wrath revealed in the Gospel for those who harden themselves in wickedness. The same cloud which was bright to Israel was dark to the Egyptians. The same Lord Jesus who invites the labouring and heavy-laden to come to Him and rest, declares most plainly that unless a man repents he will perish, and that he who believeth not shall be damned. (Luke xiii. 3. Mark xvi. 16.) The same Saviour who now holds out His hands to the disobedient and gainsaying, will come one day in flaming fire, taking vengeance on those that know not God and obey not the Gospel. (2 Thess. i. 8.) Let those things sink down into our hearts. Christ is indeed most gracious. But the day of grace must come to an end at last. An unbelieving world will find at length, as Jerusalem did, that there is judgment with God as well as mercy. No wrath will fall so heavily as that which has been long accumulating and heaping up.³⁹

The gospel tells us that God hates sin so much that He sent the Son of His love to the cross to suffer the curse of the law and the suffering of hell to pay for the sin imputed to Him. If God was willing to do this to His only begotten Son, then what will He do with those who trample the blood of Christ underfoot as worthless, who obstinately continue in a life of sin? The bitter sufferings of our Lord for imputed sin should make us stand in awe of the justice and holiness of God. Those people who turn the gospel in to a self-help therapy, a self-esteem philosophy or a tool for a more hedonistic life are simply not preaching the gospel.

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³⁹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, 2:462.