

Luke 23:32-43

Introduction

Jesus had been betrayed, arrested and put on trial by the religious establishment. They wanted him killed so they had handed him over to Pilate, hoping for the death penalty. But to their frustration, Pilate had found no basis for charges against Jesus and had wanted to release him. Eventually the religious leaders had got their wish by stirring up the crowds to call for Barabbas to be released instead. And so now, Jesus is led off to be crucified.

We're picking up the story in verse 32.

And as we follow what happens, there are three important utterances that we need to pay attention to.

Firstly, there's a prayer for forgiveness.

Secondly, a mocking taunt.

And thirdly, a request to be remembered.

We're going to look at them in turn, starting with a prayer for forgiveness - our first heading.

A prayer for forgiveness

Please look down with me at verses 32 to 34.

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals - one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

After all the build up to Jesus' death, Luke describes it with remarkably few words...in fact, just three of them: they crucified him.

He doesn't tell us any of the gory details or describe the agony that Jesus went through. He simply tells us that it happened.

What he *does* tell us are some of the circumstances surrounding Jesus' death.

First he tells us that two men, both criminals, were led out to be executed with him. We're not told what their crimes were but the fact that they were being crucified indicates that they were perceived as a threat to Rome. It's possible that they were violent and dangerous men.

The significance of these two criminals will become apparent as we read on, but it's worth noting that their presence fulfils, in a very literal way, the words of Isaiah 53, which Jesus

quoted to his disciples just a few verses previously. He said, **'It is written: "And he was numbered with the transgressors"; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfilment.'** (22:37)

Though he committed no crime and lived a sinless life, Jesus came to be counted with sinners. He came to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with sinners like you and me. His execution with a criminal on either side of him - one on his right, one on his left - provides a dramatic picture of that fact.

And in verse 34 we're told that the soldiers responsible for carrying out the execution **divided up his clothes by casting lots.**

Criminals were crucified naked to maximise the indignity and humiliation of their deaths, and the executioners had the right to share out their clothes. Luke's purpose in noting that detail here is to emphasise the humiliation to which Jesus willingly subjected himself.

And again, it fulfils the words of scripture. Psalm 22, which Jesus himself quoted from the cross, says this: **They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.** (Psalm 22:18)

These little details that fulfil scripture tell us that this was all part of God's plan. Throughout history God had been working to bring forgiveness to his people. And now everything was happening just as scripture had said it would. The plan of salvation was being accomplished. And that's why Jesus prays as he does.

Verse 34.

Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'

Jesus came to win forgiveness for sinners. And as he dies to accomplish his Father's plan of salvation, he prays that even those responsible might benefit. He's praying for all who have in some way colluded in his death: Jews and non-Jews alike. 'Father, forgive them,' he says.

I find that remarkable. Even as he dies in agony on a cross, Jesus is practising what he preached. In chapter 6, verses 27 and 28, he said: **'love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you.'**

And that's what he does.

Those who are colluding in his death don't yet know what they're doing. But Jesus prays that when they come to understand what they've done and realise the enormity of their actions, they'll repent of their sin and find forgiveness.

There's a beautiful picture of that prayer being answered in Luke's second book, which we call the book of Acts. In chapter 2, Luke describes how the apostle Peter addressed the crowds in Jerusalem and explained what had just taken place. And his speech finishes like

this: **'Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, *whom you crucified*, both Lord and Messiah.'**

Luke tells us: **When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'**

Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.' (Acts 2:36-38)

And we're told that **about three thousand were added to their number that day.** (Acts 3:41)

These verses are showing us Christ's love for lost humanity. As he hung in agony on the cross, his concern was for those who rejected him and killed him.

It's as we look at the cross that we grasp the strength of Jesus' desire to forgive people.

He headed for Jerusalem knowing full well how it would play out. He knew exactly what would happen to him there. And he headed straight for it. He went deliberately and purposefully to Jerusalem to die for the sins of his people so that he might offer them forgiveness and life.

That's what he gives to you and me when we repent of our sin and put our faith in him. He knows our failings. He knows our sins and our darkest secrets. Yet he laid down his life all the same, to bring us forgiveness.

It's the most wonderful gift that you and I can ever receive.

And the test that we've understood our need of it, Jesus says, is that we are willing to forgive others just as we have been forgiven ourselves.

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he taught them to say: **'Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.'** (Luke 11:4)

Forgiveness isn't always easy. But it isn't a matter of gritting our teeth and summoning up forgiveness from somewhere deep inside us.

Rather, it's the work of the Spirit within us as he opens our eyes to see how much we need to be forgiven ourselves.

If you and I have experienced God's forgiveness for the wrongs we have committed, then it will transform our attitude to the wrongs we have suffered. We'll see them in a different light because of Jesus.

As we love him more and more for all that he's done for us, and become more and more like him, then we'll find ourselves becoming more and more eager to forgive, as he is.

In today's 'cancel culture', in which forgiveness is in short supply, Christians should be known for their willingness to forgive, because we know how much we have been forgiven.

Our response to the cross should be to praise and adore Jesus, to delight in his love, and to love others as he loves us.

Yet that isn't how the crowd of people around Jesus responded. They responded with a mocking taunt - our second heading.

A mocking taunt

Please look with me at verses 35 to 39.

The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One.'

The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, 'If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.'

There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'

The notice hanging above Jesus' head carries Rome's mocking voice: here is the king of the Jews. What a pathetic specimen compared to the might of the Roman Empire.

And those around continue the joke.

Notice how the mockery moves closer and closer. First the rulers, who are standing watching with the crowd, sneer at Jesus from a distance. Then the soldiers come up to the cross and mock him. As far as they're concerned, this man is a parody of a king, so they offer him cheap wine vinegar as is befitting his status. After them, one of the criminals hanging by his side hurls insults at him.

To all of them, his death is evidence of his failure.

They all take up the same taunt: if you're God's King then save yourself!

The fact that Jesus was dying on a cross - to their eyes, helplessly - was merely proof that his claims were empty and that he was a failure.

What they *can't* see is what is really going on here.

Jesus *could* save himself. He could come down from the cross in an instant. But he wouldn't. This is the very reason for which he had come. He had come to Jerusalem with steely determination to do this one thing. As he died on the cross, he was finally

accomplishing God's great plan of salvation. He was winning life for his people. He was securing their salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.

And if he was to do that, if he was to win salvation and life for his people, then there was one person he couldn't save. That was himself.

At the cross, the sinless Son of God willingly laid down his life as a sacrifice for lost and helpless sinners like you and me: it was *his* life in exchange for the life of his people.

He dies as our substitute. He bears the punishment that we deserve, in our place, so that we can be forgiven.

Through his death, Jesus has done for us what we are powerless to do for ourselves. And if we recognise that fact, then we will come to him in repentance and faith, to receive from his hands the blessings that he has so graciously won.

That's what's bound up in the second criminal's request to be remembered. Our second heading: a request to be remembered.

A request to be remembered

Please look down, finally, at verses 40 to 43.

But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.'

Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'

Jesus answered him, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.'

It's not clear how much the second criminal understands about Jesus, but he clearly recognises a number of things.

For a start, he recognises that the punishment he's suffering is divine justice. He's guilty and deserves to be punished.

And he recognises Jesus' innocence in contrast with his own guilt. Whereas he deserves to be punished, Jesus doesn't.

And crucially, he recognises that Jesus can help him.

So notice that he addresses Jesus by name: **Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'**

That's what others have done in Luke's Gospel, who have sought Jesus' help.

In chapter 17, ten lepers meet him outside a village and, standing at a distance, they called out: **'Jesus, Master, have pity on us!'** (17:13).

In chapter 18, a blind beggar was sitting by the roadside as Jesus approached, and he called out: **'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!'** (18:38)

All these people are calling out to Jesus personally for mercy. Seeking help from Jesus means coming to him personally. Being a Christian means trusting Jesus personally as your King and Saviour. It's to have a personal relationship with him through faith.

And the second criminal's faith is evident in the final thing he recognises about Jesus: that his death on a cross is not evidence of failure but the route to his throne.

Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'

And Luke goes on:

Jesus answered him, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.'

This criminal asks Jesus for mercy. And Jesus responds by telling him that this very same day he will enter paradise with him. What a promise! And what peace that criminal must have experienced in his final moments.

And notice what is truly wonderful about Jesus' promise to the second criminal. It's not merely that he will be in paradise. It's that Jesus says: **'you will be *with me* in paradise.'**

When we come to Jesus, personally, Jesus gives himself to us, personally.

A day will come when each one of us will stand before God's judgement seat, deserving justice. We will stand before God as sinners who justly deserve his anger and wrath: not just for a moment but in eternity. But Jesus died on a cross to take our punishment in our place so that we can be forgiven.

As we come to him in repentance and faith, receiving the forgiveness that he alone has won, we are joined together with him. His death becomes our death. And his future becomes our future. Through faith, we enter a new and wonderful relationship that will last for all eternity, with him in heaven.

And that means that we can live with a new peace. It's the peace that comes from knowing that our eternal destiny is secure; our safe arrival in heaven is assured. It's the peace which only Jesus can give, which comes from knowing that, whatever may happen in this life, a glorious and joy-filled future awaits us, with him.

At the cross, Jesus has secured for us a more wonderful future than we can possibly imagine.

Let's pray.