

19th century Scottish philosopher and essayist, Thomas Carlyle (**picture**), wrote, “*If Jesus Christ were to come today, people would not even crucify him; they would ask him to dinner and hear what he had to say and make fun of it.*” Carlyle, no Christian himself, didn’t understand the fury of evil in the presence of perfect righteousness. There’s no reason to believe that Jesus wouldn’t be treated today, in our so-called enlightened age, as He was then.

Jesus’ crucifixion was a public event, one of the most attested facts in history. Crucifixions was common in that day, but there were to be several surprises that, in the light of redemption history, are eternally significant.

Recently, Jane and I returned from a conference in D.C. Several times we encountered puzzled looks when we relayed that we drove rather than flew to D.C. We could drive through this account of the crucifixion in Luke. Many books have been written and countless sermons have been preached from this passage. For example, Jesus spoke seven times from the cross, three of those are in our text. A message could be preached on each saying.

As our Lord dies on the cross, He’s mourned by some and mocked by others, but He confidently places Himself in His Father’s hands. The passage begins with a compulsory disciple and ends with a covert one coming into the open.

Today we’re going to do an overview of this passage, “flying” over it and noting the hilltops. Please open your Bibles to Luke 23:26-56 (p. 884).

Compulsory obligation opens the door for a discipleship opportunity. Do you believe in accidents? Personally, I believe in divine appointments, strategic “meetings” that God designs for His glory. While he didn’t know it, Simon of Cyrene had a divine appointment with the Savior that day.

After a man was condemned, he’s forced to carry his own cross as he’s escorted to the place of crucifixion by four Roman soldiers. The soldiers intentionally took the longest possible route in those cruel parades, hoping to cross the paths of as many as possible. They wanted their subjects to have a vivid reminder that the penalty for breaking Roman law was swift and brutal. That’s the purpose of this grotesque parade.

Luke tells us Simon is from Cyrene, a city in North Africa. There was a large Jewish community there. Probably Simon came to Jerusalem as a pilgrim on the journey of a lifetime to observe Passover. He’s a tourist, just beginning to explore the Holy City that he’d heard about all his life. He’s shocked when he stumbles across a crucifixion parade on those unfamiliar streets.

What normally would have been a brief delay as he waited for the procession to pass by, turned into much more. A surprising thing happened. Jesus crumbled under the weight of His cross right at Simon’s feet! The day of Jesus’ arrest had been exhausting, so tiring that His disciples couldn’t keep their eyes open while Jesus prayed in the Garden. After His arrest, Jesus was brutally beaten, so His remaining strength gave out, just as He crossed Simon’s path.

Jerusalem was an occupied city. Roman law gave its soldiers the right of conscription. They could draft anyone they wanted to do their bidding at a moment’s notice. A soldier took the flat part of his spear blade and put it on their shoulder. That person was immediately conscripted into the service of Rome. With Jesus and His cross on the ground, the soldiers realized Jesus could go no further so they exercised this right. One of them put his spear blade on the shoulder of the closest able-bodied man, Simon. Thus conscripted, Simon was forced to pick up Jesus’ cross and carry it.

Carrying a cross was a sign of guilt. While Jesus was innocent, Simon wasn’t. He was a sinner just like us. Carrying the cross was a symbol of condemnation but Jesus took our condemnation on Himself. As we picture Simon carrying this heavy cross, we should see the heavy burden of our own sin. When Jesus was nailed to the cross, He’s dying in our place for our sin and guilt.

Luke doesn’t tell us anything else about Simon. He appears though two more times in the New Testament (Matthew 27:32, Mark 15:21.) The fact that he’s mentioned in all three synoptic gospels suggests that his later history was known to each of the gospel writers. That would indicate that he became a Christian. Mark in his Gospel expands on this, telling us that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus. It’s unusual for a father to be identified by his children, unless of course the children are well-known.

So, we can assume that by the time Mark’s Gospel was circulated, two of the most famous Christians in the empire were Simon’s sons, Alexander and Rufus. The only reason Mark mentions them by name would be because he knew his readers knew who he was talking about. Later in Romans 16:13, Rufus is mentioned again, described as the son of a woman whom the Apostle Paul considered his surrogate mother. Putting all of these pieces together, it becomes obvious that Simon of Cyrene became a Christian. His “chance” encounter of carrying Jesus’ cross became his doorway to eternal life. He came to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover and met God’s Passover Lamb.

Apparently, when he returned home, Simon shared the gospel with his wife, who not only became a Christ-follower, but a “Mom” to the Apostle Paul. Simon shared his faith with his sons, who became leaders in the church.

What started out as horrible shock and embarrassment became a grace-filled divine appointment. Simon would tell you that his “chance” encounter with Jesus was the greatest thing that ever happened to him! The purpose of a pilgrimage is to get closer to God and Simon met Jesus face to face.

Gospel opportunities unfold around us all the time. We’re in a God appointed place, at a God appointed time, to be reapers in a God appointed harvest. Don’t miss them! Be sensitive to divine appointments to share the gospel! God has a Simon waiting for you. Some lost soul is the reason you are where you are.

2. Compassion for others in the midst of pain. Look at verses 27-31. Accepting the gospel is not just having your ticket punched for heaven. We become Jesus, His ambassadors, to the lost world around us. We’re called by God to live selflessly, compassionately like Jesus. Henri Nouwen (**picture**) reminds us, “*Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.*”

Jesus’ interaction with the “*Daughters of Jerusalem*” is only recorded by Luke. These women aren’t disciples but women of the City who loudly mourned over death and executions. The impression we get here is of a loud demonstration of deep, heartfelt grief.

Yet, as Jesus walks toward a violent death, He doesn’t think of Himself but of them. He longs for their repentance, not sympathy. He knows judgement is soon coming. It was a curse and unthinkable to not have children in that culture. He urges them to look beyond the present to the inevitable consequences of the nation’s rejection of their Messiah. When the Roman armies attacked Jerusalem in 70 A.D., as is always the case in war, women and children would suffer the most. The agony will be so horrible that people will cry out, longing for death as a way of relief.

“*For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?*” What’s Jesus saying? If the innocent Savior suffered like this, what will be the horrible fate of the guilty Jews?

What must catch our attention is that Jesus, the innocent suffering victim, was thinking of others. It should encourage every hearer, on this side of God’s final judgment, to turn now to Jesus for grace and mercy. It should encourage those of us who know Him, even in the midst of suffering, to remember that all of our suffering is temporary but for those who don’t know Christ, suffering is eternal. Even in our pain, they need our compassion and witness.

3. Forgiveness in the face of the unforgivable, vss. 32-38. The focus of the Gospels is not on His physical suffering. Contrast Luke’s very brief and restrained account of four words, “*there they crucified Him*” with the detailed description of the 2004 film, *The Passion of the Christ*. Crucifixion was a slow, painful death, yet none of the Gospels dwell on the gruesome details.

It’s not the greatest suffering. Jesus greatest suffering was bearing the penalty for the sin of the world. It’s what makes our Lord’s words so powerful, “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*” They were committing deicide and didn’t know it. They knew *what* they were doing, but not *who* they were doing it to.

As He hung on the cross, the first words Jesus spoke were actually a prayer. In the original, the verb “*Jesus said*” is in the perfect tense, which conveys continual action. Apparently, Jesus repeated this prayer several times. As they nailed the huge spike through the skin and muscle, Jesus said, “*Father, forgive them.*” As they place his other arm on the crossbeam and pounded that spike into His hand, “*Father, forgive them.*” Next, they move to his feet, and cross one foot over the other. The soldier drives the final spike through both feet, pounding the nail deeply into the wooden cross. Again, He prays, “*Father, forgive them.*” As the soldiers lift the cross into a vertical position and drop it into a hole, it falls and bangs to a sudden stop. Jesus’ body is jerked with the momentum. The fiery pain in His hands and feet is excruciating, yet He opens His eyes and gazes at those who are killing Him, and prays again, “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*” That’s grace!

John 1:14 says Jesus was “*full of grace and truth.*” Grace and mercy are two sides of the same coin. Grace is God giving us what we need, but don’t deserve—His unconditional love and full, free forgiveness. Mercy is God withholding what we do deserve, judgement, death and hell.

Though they freely acknowledged that Jesus saved others, that He performed miracles and healings, they still wouldn’t believe Him. Their words though are pregnant with unintentional truth. The fact is: Jesus cannot save everyone. There’s one person that Jesus will not save. He made a volitional choice. Jesus won’t save Himself. Our Lord can either save sinners or save Himself. But He can’t save both. That’s why He ignores their taunt, “*save yourself.*” He was committed to saving others. Because Jesus was the Messiah, the true King of the Jews—because the sign above His head was true—He refused to save Himself, though He could have. As Charles Spurgeon (**picture**) said, “*Jesus Christ looked down and He saw the people He was dying for – some cringing, some snarling, all of them clueless. And in the greatest act of strength*

and love in the history of the world, He stayed.” Most victims of crucifixion screamed and cursed their executioners. Not Jesus. as they nailed Him to the cross, He did what He commands us to do – to pray for our enemies.

As He dies for us, He’s willingly robbed of everything – His honor, His followers, His life and even the last remnant of His earthly possessions as the soldiers gamble for His clothing. He became absolutely poor for our sake that we might be made rich in Him. He was stripped naked before the leering crowd so we could be covered by His righteousness.

It was Jesus’ nakedness that so encouraged Corrie ten Boom and her sister, Betsie (**picture**), as they were marched naked before the Nazi guards every day in the Ravensbruck Concentration Camp. One day in the midst of this added humiliation, it struck Corrie and she leaned toward Betsie, ahead of her in line, whispering, “Betsie, they took His clothes too.” Ahead of her she heard a small gasp and Betsie whispered, “*Oh, Corrie. And I never thanked Him.*”

On the cross, Jesus forgave a specific sin, the murder of God. No sin, not even deicide is beyond His grace. One soldier was listening that day and was forgiven. For him Jesus crucifixion was the dawn of God’s amazing grace!

4. Evangelism in the most unlikely place, verses 39-43. *Dum spiro spero* is a Latin phrase and the motto of the State of South Carolina. It means, “*While I breathe, I hope.*” It well applies to this scene.

If anyone refutes a good works salvation, it’s the dying thief. He’s a bad man. No doubt he’s violated each of the Ten Commandments. He does nothing but accept Christ’s words of salvation and believe in His heart. He doesn’t do anything good or worthy. He’s never baptized and never takes communion. But Jesus promised Him that he was going Home with Jesus that very day!

It give us hope. It’s never too late. No one is beyond God’s grace. This is not about a good thief and a bad one. They’re both bad. It’s about a great Savior.

What a difference between these two men. One wants what Jesus can do for him. The other just wants Jesus. Friend, what do you want? Many talk about heaven. Last week I had a conversation with someone about heaven, but they never once mentioned Jesus. Could you be happy in heaven if Jesus wasn’t there? What would satisfy you short of Jesus? Some saw Jesus raise the dead and still wouldn’t believe. This man sees Him being put to death, yet believes.

This must encourage us to never miss the most inopportune opportunity. Jesus is in excruciating pain and dying, yet He reaches out to a lost soul. I hope when I take my last breath, I’m still talking about Jesus because really, what else matters?

The word for “*paradise*” is the word for *garden*. What Adam and Eve lost, Jesus gains back. But the most precious part of this isn’t the garden, but that this criminal will be with Jesus. His words, “*remember me*” are all that any of us can ask of Jesus. The dying words of the devout astronomer Copernicus (**picture**) were: “*I do not ask you for the grace that you gave St. Paul; nor can I dare to ask you for the grace that you granted to St. Peter; but, the mercy which You did show to the dying robber, that mercy, show to me.*”

It’s a deathbed repentance. Some foolishly say, “I’ll wait until the end of my life then I’ll turn to Jesus.” That’s presumption. Can Jesus save a rotten sinner moments before they die? Absolutely! Alexander MacClaren (**picture**) wisely noted, “*There is one example of deathbed repentance in the Bible so that none may despair; but only one so that none may presume.*”

Friend, please don’t be a fool. Don’t wait until the last moment to trust Christ. No one knows when their last moment will be.

5. Even the very worst is temporary. “*It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun’s light failed.*” Luke the dutiful doctor/historian records the exact hours before Jesus’ death. The 6th hour is about noon. The 9th is 3:00 P.M. He’s using the Jewish way of reckoning time.

Mark’s gospel records that darkness fell over the whole land (Mark 15:33). The darkness was a miracle. It’s the time of the Passover. Passover only occurred when there was a full moon, so it couldn’t have been an eclipse. Add to that an eclipse lasts for minutes, this darkness lasted for three hours.

Chuck Swindoll (**picture**) notes; “*It was as if creation were mourning the death of its Maker.*” Some suggest that God provided a thick black blanket to cover Christ’s nakedness and shame. In the Old Testament darkness was a cosmic sign of mourning, Amos 8:9-10. Others suggest it speaks of the utter darkness of sin, humanity’s sin. Death is marked by darkness and precedes resurrection, and darkness precedes life.

When the darkness lifted, we might have well expected God’s judgement to have fallen on the crowd who were killing His Son. But when the light returned, only one person had experienced God’s wrath: Jesus, the Light of the world. For our sin, He’s plunged into deep spiritual darkness. Our Savior hung suspended between heaven and earth, between God and man, abandoned by His friends, destroyed by His enemies and punished in our place by His Father.

At some point during these events, the curtain of the Temple was torn in two. The curtain separating man from the presence of God in the Most Holy Place is no longer necessary. The symbolism is clear, the way to direct access to God is now open because Jesus, God’s lamb paid for our sin.

With the curtain torn, the Ark of the Covenant, the blood soaked mercy seat is opened to the world. Matthew's Gospel tells us that the curtain was torn in two from top to bottom. Man couldn't do that. It's torn by God. The way to God is now open. Anyone can have a relationship with God. The payment for sin is fully paid. All that's required to be made right with God was completed on the cross. We may not have access to the President or other dignitaries, we have something far better – we have immediate access to King Jesus.

“Father, into your hands I commit My spirit!” was the Jews' traditional evening prayer that pious Jews offered before going to sleep. Jesus chose to pray it at the moment that He entered the ultimate sleep – death. As He prayed this “good night” prayer, He prayed it as no other Jew had ever prayed it – because He added *“Father”* to the beginning. *“Father (Abba), into your hands I commit My spirit.”* The ascription *“Father”* was revolutionary. No Jew referred to God as *“Father.”* But now we can be His children.

When you take your last breath will you be able to say, *“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit”*? Many famous Christians have duplicated Jesus' when they died. Augustine's (**picture**) last words were, *“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”* As John Huss (**picture**) was burned at the stake he cried, *“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”* Evangelist D.L. Moody (**picture**) was the Billy Graham of the 19th century. His last words were: *“This is glorious! If this is death it is beautiful! Earth is receding. Heaven is approaching. God is calling me. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”*

6. Discipleship shines brightest in the dark, verses 47-56. The centurion and crowd were deeply moved when Jesus died. His death did what His life could not do. It had broken the hard hearts of men. The centurion saw far deeper than his fellow Roman, Pilate. He saw who Jesus truly was. Note too that the women who followed Him were the last at the cross and the first at the tomb.

Bodies of the crucified were left on a cross to rot or for the vultures. Joseph was a Jewish leader, so what he does here is suicide for his career. Even though Jesus is dead, he declares himself as a Christ-follower. He asks Pilate for the body. Then, they tenderly took Jesus from the cross, pulled the nails out, carried him to what was a family tomb prepared for Joseph. It had never been used, but Joseph gave it away for his Lord. He washes the body and wraps it in spices. It was a temporary burial. They'd return after the Sabbath to do the job properly. The prophecy of Isaiah 53:9 is fulfilled here, *“And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death.”* Since Jesus died for others, it seems appropriate that He's buried in someone else's tomb. Joseph is moved by love and shows moral courage that the disciples lacked.

We know nothing else about Joseph. He's not mentioned in the book of Acts or Epistles. Yet, at the 11th hour he's unafraid to show himself as one of our Lord's friends. While the disciples had forsaken Jesus, Joseph is unashamed to show his love and commitment. Others had confessed Him while He was living. Joseph publicly confessed to be His friend when He's dead.

Living in a world that's increasingly hostile to Christianity, it's easy just to blend in, to laugh at dirty jokes, never to confront the gossip or speak a word that would identify you as a Christian. Besides, it might cost your reputation or your job! Sometimes even among Christians, it's hard to hold to your convictions for fear of what others will think.

Joseph is a rich leader and upper class. In evangelism, we usually reach down or across, yet often forget to reach up. This kind act cost Joseph everything, but he's willing to serve even a dead Messiah. In nearly every corner of the world, you'll find believers, often where you least expect them.

Please note, because this is so vital, that it was a new tomb, never used before. Tombs would be used over and over again. This way there was no chance of a mistake, as there might have been had there been 3 or 4 bodies at different stages of decomposition in that dark cave. As we'll study next week, the missing body could only have been Jesus' on that first Easter Sunday.

Conclusion: What does it all mean? Why did Jesus suffer? Let me share **four statements** that I believe help us answer this question.

Jesus died the way He did to illustrate the results of sin. The cross showed how ugly our sins are. Our culture believes there's no difference between right and wrong. Most think that “sin,” if you want to call it that, is no big deal.

Sin always hurts us. It always pays back with pain and death. To see how awful sin is, look at the cross. The reason Jesus' death was so brutal is that He bore on His body the consequences of the sins of all mankind. Whenever you begin to think sin is harmless, picture the cross. It was our sin that put Him there. The cross illustrates the final product of our disobedience against God.

Jesus died on the cross to reveal the unlimited love of God. The cross is the clearest revelation of God's love. Romans 5:8, *“God commends His love toward us in this. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”* Jesus died the way He did

to show us the extent to which God's love would go. The cross reveals there's no limit to God's love. Jesus died for all of us because God loves all of us that much!

Jesus died on the cross as the payment for our sins. Jesus didn't just die. He died for us. 1 Peter 2:24, "*It was our sins which Jesus bore on the cross.*"

Pastor E. V. Hill (**picture**), tells of an evangelist who preached at his church one night. The evangelist's message was on the judgment of God. He said, "All of you who drink, get on out of here! You're lost!" Some of the people got up and left the sanctuary, milling about in the church foyer. Then he said, "All of you who smoke, get on out of here. You're lost!" Half of the congregation got up and left. He continued, "All of you who gossip, get on out of here. You're lost!" And some more left. Then he said, "All of you who think adulterous thoughts, get on out of here." And the rest left. But finally, when the evangelist was through, E. V. Hill walked up to the pulpit and shouted at the top of his voice, "All you folks out there, come on back in. It was just for such as you that Jesus died." He was right.

When the sinless, Son of God, hung on the cross, He took all of our sins on Himself. Jesus paid it all. It was just for such as you (and me) that He died.

Jesus died so there would be an invitation. He hung on that tree on Golgotha as an invitation to all mankind to return to God. With the cross, God was saying as He did through Isaiah, "*Come now, let us reason together! Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool*" (Isaiah 1:18). 2,000 years ago the perfect Son of God died a painful death on a shameful cross for sinful mankind. When Jesus cried, "*It is finished!*" He was announcing a new door that leads into the presence of God. He invites you to enter today. Do you know Him? Is He your Savior? Will you come to Him today?

Maybe you know Him but your heart has grown cold. You've lost your first love, the joy of your salvation.

John Gordon was a respected general during the Civil War. After the war, he was running for the U.S. Senate, but a man who had served under him in the war, angry over some political incident, was determined to see him defeated. During the convention, he angrily stamped down the aisle with his anti-Gordon vote in hand. As he saw Gordon sitting on the platform, he noticed how Gordon's once handsome face was now disfigured from the scars of battle. Overcome with emotion, he exclaimed, "It's no use; I can't do it. Here's my vote for John Gordon." Then, turning to the general, he said, "Forgive me, General. I had forgotten the scars."

Friend, if your love for the Lord has grown cold, go back to the cross and remember His scars—not just the physical ones, but scars of God's wrath that Jesus bore in your place. Let His amazing love reignite your heart in passionate love and devotion.