

THE DEATH OF JESUS

Leader pages on pp. 116-119

THE POINT:
JESUS DIED TO PAY THE DEBT OF OUR SIN.

LUKE 23:32-49

MEMORY VERSE

³² Two others—criminals—were also led away to be executed with him. ³³ When they arrived at the place called The Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals, one on the right and one on the left. ³⁴ **Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided his clothes and cast lots.**

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³⁵ The people stood watching, and even the leaders were scoffing: “He saved others; let him save himself if this is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One!”
³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him. They came offering him sour wine and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself!”
³⁷ and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself!”
³⁸ An inscription was above him: This Is the King of the Jews.
³⁹ Then one of the criminals hanging there began to yell insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”
⁴⁰ But the other answered, rebuking him: “Don’t you even fear God, since you are undergoing the same punishment?
⁴¹ We are punished justly, because we’re getting back what we deserve for the things we did, but this man has done nothing wrong.”
⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”
⁴³ And he said to him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”
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⁴⁴ It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three,
⁴⁵ because the sun’s light failed. The curtain of the sanctuary was split down the middle. ⁴⁶ And Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit.” Saying this, he breathed his last. ⁴⁷ When the centurion saw what happened, he began to glorify God, saying, “This man really was righteous!” ⁴⁸ All the crowds that had gathered for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, went home, striking their chests. ⁴⁹ But all who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

KEYWORDS

Today . . . in paradise (v. 43)—*Today* indicated the immediacy of Jesus’s promise. Jesus used this word in referring to the final home of the righteous, heaven.
I entrust my spirit (v. 46)—Even on the cross, Jesus expressed His confidence in God the Father and His care.

The curtain . . . was split (v. 45)—This curtain separated the holy place from the holy of holies in the Jewish temple. With this splitting, access to God was made available through Jesus’s death.

WHY WAS JESUS'S DEATH NECESSARY?

The average American holds a debt balance of \$96,371.² That total comes from a variety of different sources including credit cards, car loans, student loans, and mortgages. And while some sources of debt are more destructive than others, most every adult knows what it is to live life owing someone something every month.

While we become accustomed to the idea, it is still refreshing to think about what life would be like to be free and clear from all debts. And yet the removal of debt only happens through discipline and effort.

But this debt is only a shadow of the greater debt we all owe—the debt of sin, accumulated over a lifetime of rebellious choices made against a holy God. But unlike the rest of our debts, the debt of sin can never be cleared in our own effort. It must be paid. The question is, who is going to make that payment for us?

To Forgive Our Sins // Luke 23:32-34

Three crosses stood on a hill outside Jerusalem. The sun beating down all day with the crowds witnessing the executions. But no matter how familiar the scene is, it is the centerpiece of our

faith, the culmination of the plan of God to deal with the debt of sin. The cast of characters present in this moment are a vivid depiction of both the grace of God and the mighty cost of sin. So, who is it that we find on the hill that day?

- **The criminals.** Jesus was not crucified alone; on either side of him was a criminal, someone who had been arrested, tried, and convicted for their transgressions. Though we don't know the exact nature of their crimes, we can surmise they were serious, as crucifixion was reserved for the most serious cases. We further know, based on the words of one of the criminals, that their sentence was just. This was not a case of innocent men wrongly punished but instead the guilty receiving the punishment their society handed out to them.

These men serve as a reminder to us that there are real consequences for wrongdoing; indeed, that one of the purposes of society is to dispense a measure of justice for such wrongdoing. Of course, the earthly justice system is not perfect. Sentences then, as now, are often too light or too heavy, and many times people are punished despite their innocence. There are issues of bias, prejudice, and retribution that taint any



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earthly system of justice. But these men also serve as a symbolic reminder that none of those shortcomings are true in God's justice system. He is the perfect Judge, and the punishment He hands down is therefore perfectly just. Sin, as cosmic rebellion against the perfect and holy God, demands to be punished (Rom. 6:23).

- **Jesus.** We also find that Jesus was on the hill. Unlike the criminals, Jesus was not justly convicted. He had done no crime, and it was through a series of late-night, kangaroo courts swayed and driven by public opinion that brought Him to the cross that day.

Despite the injustice on display, we should not understand Jesus's crucifixion as if He was a victim of tragic circumstances. Jesus was exactly where He intended to be, because He was exactly where the Father sent Him to be: "This Jesus of Nazareth was a man attested to you by God with miracles, wonders, and signs that God did among you through him, just as you yourselves know. Though he was delivered up according to God's determined plan and foreknowledge, you used lawless people to nail him to a cross and kill him" (Acts 2:22-23).

The presence of Jesus at the cross was the fulfillment of the plan of God. This was always His destination, and Jesus was well aware of it. He was committed to living out the mission God had given for Him which would result in the forgiveness of sins. We see an example of that forgiveness on display as Jesus, even in the midst of His pain, had the salvation of mankind on His mind. In an amazing display of mercy, He cried out on behalf of those who were bent on His death. This leads us to another group of people involved in the crucifixion.

- **Us.** In a spiritual sense, we, too, were there at the cross as well. We find ourselves in the criminals, for we also have been justly condemned for our sin and the punishment for that sin is death. And we find ourselves in the crowd who, even though Jesus was dying for them, still clamored for His execution. This is the true darkness of our situation; it is that we are so lost in our sin that we fail to see the desperation of our situation.

WHEN DO YOU FIND IT DIFFICULT TO FORGIVE OTHERS?

To Offer Redemption //

Luke 23:35-43

The cross of Christ is many things. It is the display of God's love. It is also the display of God's justice. It's an example of mob mentality and it's the convergence of God's sovereignty and human choice. Among all these things, the cross is also ironic in other ways:



DIGGING DEEPER ENTERING PARADISE

As noted already in this lesson, one of the criminals crucified beside Jesus understood that He was innocent. He also understood that Jesus would one day bring his kingdom to Earth. The criminal was going to die that very day, and so was Jesus. However, the criminal understood enough about the purposes of God to know that death would not stop Jesus from ruling over the Earth or remembering him, even though his name is not mentioned. This is why Jesus explains that the unnamed criminal would be with Him that very day. Understanding who Jesus is, what He can do, and begging for Him to act on our behalf is the only way to enter paradise. Even if we could live forever, being without Jesus would make such a life pointless. While we cannot return to the paradise God made in Eden, we can look forward to the coming day when Jesus will let all His disciples live with Him in His kingdom.

What are some current implications related to Jesus's kingdom being a paradise?

- **The King of the Jews.** This was what the sign read which was put on the cross of Jesus. Though the sign was meant as mockery, it was ironically a partially true statement. Jesus was, and is, the King of the Jews. But that's not all. He is also the King of all the universe.
- **"Save yourself and us."** These were the words one of the criminals cried out to Jesus as they were both hanging there, and there is a double irony in that statement. Jesus could have saved Himself, not just at that moment, but at any number of moments leading up to it. The second irony is that Jesus refused to save Himself, because He intended to save other people. The justice of God demands that sin be paid for. Had Jesus saved Himself, He would have condemned not only the man asking to be saved, but also every other human being. Jesus chose not to save Himself in order to save other people.

HOW DO YOU SEE THE THIEF ON THE CROSS AS AN EXAMPLE OF SAVING FAITH?

The cross, a symbol that at the time only represented scorn and shame, would become the symbol of hope and triumph for all who trust in Christ. As Paul would later write, "For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but it is the power of God to us who are being saved" (1 Cor. 1:18).

That which the world considers wisdom is foolishness in the kingdom of God. The guilty go free, and the innocent One is punished. The surprise of redemption is that Jesus paid the price for sin through sacrificial strength instead of magisterial power. Jesus did this to offer us a chance to be redeemed. It is up to us to decide whether we will trust in Him or not, and all those who do will be saved.

To Open the Way // Luke 23:44-49

Though these verses record the final moments of the life of Jesus, those moments were the culmination of His entire life and ministry. Everything had led to the cross, and now the cross was at hand. Jesus, the Son of God and the Savior of the World, died, and in so doing completed His earthly ministry.

The Son, who had existed for all eternity in perfect love and fellowship with the Father and Spirit, was crushed under the weight of sin. For in those hours at Calvary, God poured out justified wrath and punishment for sin onto His beloved Son. In light of that, there are two lenses we can look through to see what was truly happening at the cross.

- **The Redemption of Mankind.** One of the lenses we can use to look at the cross is about us. The reason the suffering of Jesus was so extreme was the price that had to be paid for God to buy us back from the clutches of sin



and death. The word "redemption" (*agorazō* in Greek) means to buy back. It was a term borrowed from the slave market. It was the price paid to buy a slave back and to set the slave free.

We are often tempted to minimize sin. We talk about sin, believe in the concept of sin, even regret and try to repent from our sin, but rarely do we see the immediate effect of our sin, especially that sin of which only we and God are aware. We sin, we feel bad, and then we go on our way, and over the course of time, we cease to feel the gravity of our sin as deeply as we once did. But the cross shows us just how serious our sin truly is.

To bring us back to God, Jesus bore that separation on our behalf. When we look to the cross, we can see the punishment that we truly deserve borne by another. And because of this, our debt has been paid. "It is finished," as Jesus said (John 19:30). If Jesus fully paid for our sin, then

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there is nothing left for us to do. Our relationship with God has been restored, once and forever, and there is no more payment necessary. The redemption of mankind has been accomplished.

- **The Satisfaction of God.** Our own redemption isn't the only lens we should look through to the cross. The cross isn't only (or even mainly) about what we get; it's instead about God and His justice. The cross clearly shows us the severity of sin. The penalty for sin is death. Not just physical death, but spiritual death. When we violate the will of a perfect and holy God, we earn His divine wrath and justice. We deserve death.

It wasn't only the future of humanity at stake at the cross; it was the character of God. If God left sin unpunished, then He would be compromising His perfect justice that demanded payment for sin. Jesus not only died for us, He also died to preserve God's righteous and perfect character.

God's justice was satisfied and satisfied once and for all. Though we might not often think of the cross in this way, when we do, we come to see to a greater degree of what Jesus fully and completely accomplished. When we do, we can look to the cross of Christ and know that "God the just, was satisfied, to look on Him and pardon me."

**BECAUSE OF JESUS'S SACRIFICE,
HOW DO YOU NOW VIEW DEATH?**

DID YOU KNOW?

African American culture is often intertwined with hip-hop music. While much of this music is related to secular matters, there have also been some rappers that reflect on the crucifixion. Public Enemy's song "Welcome to the Terrordome" compares the struggle of blackness to that of Jesus's suffering. Tupac Shakur noted that Jesus's kindness meant He would be an empathetic judge since He lived in a "crime land."³ While these artists fall short of being theologians, or even exemplary disciples, they have been influential. Because of this, it is worth pondering how their secular comments about Jesus can be turned into opportunities for a gospel witness. Our sinful nature outside of Jesus causes us to stain things so much that they can appear to be unredeemable.

Biblical Truth: When we can identify even a partial truth, we should seek to identify how God had providentially allowed us a platform where we can proclaim the full truth of His Word.

How are you taking advantage of opportunities to share the truth of the redemptive message of Christ?

LIVE IT

How should we respond to receiving the "paid in full" receipt for our sin debt?

The cross of Christ was not some tragic accident or terrible confluence of chance; it was the plan of God to save human beings from their sin. We can live our lives today because of His finished work. He paid the sin debt for all who believe in Him. Because of this, our response should be one of gratitude and commitment.

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- **Commit to Memory.** Memorize 1 Corinthians 1:18b to remind you of the great reversal that came as a result of the cross: "It is the power of God to us who are being saved."
- **Commit to Prayer.** Commit to pray daily this week for one person close to you who has not yet believed in the death and resurrection of Jesus.
- **Commit to Study.** What is one specific area of your life in which you are currently feeling anxious? Spend fifteen minutes journaling about how the cross of Christ can guide your actions in that situation.

DAILY READINGS

1. THE CARE OF THE CROSS // LUKE 23:32-34

"People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care." This well-known quote is attributed to countless individuals. How many people do you know who really care? People who care are not easily distracted when obstacles and challenges come their way. The intent and undergirding mission of care are always before them. Jesus leads the charge regarding caring and remaining on the mission. Even while dying, nothing got in His way. Jesus was so focused, that He did not lose sight of the mission. While crucified, He defended the soldiers before the Father and asked Him to forgive them because they did not know what they were doing.

Christ demonstrated His care for the world all the way to the cross.

2. THE SACRIFICE // LUKE 23:35-38

Knowing who you are makes all the difference when carrying out our daily activities. When you know you are a surgeon, you focus on performing surgeries. A firefighter's focus is fighting fires and saving lives. Christ knew He was the Sacrifice, His focus was on sacrificing His life, not saving it. Many at the scene of the crucifixion were unaware of Jesus being *the* sacrifice, so, they didn't understand why He didn't simply save Himself - and He could have! Yet He chose to sacrifice His life, so that you and I could live. We too have a choice to live a sacrificial life so someone else can see Christ and come to know Him for themselves.

As Christians, the needs of others outweigh the needs of our own.

3. PAID IN FULL // LUKE 23:44-46

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" is an infamous opening line from Charles Dickens's novel "A Tale of Two Cities." Have you ever experienced a best of times, and a worst of times moment? It is not typically hoped for, but it sometimes happens. Good Friday, a day like none

other, is one of those moments. Between 12 noon and 3 p.m., nature, Jesus' followers, the crowds, and at least one soldier would all declare this day a bad one. Heaven, on the contrary, would declare this day to be a good and glorious day. Everything that looked like defeat, was a victory.

There was a huge sin debt that needed to be paid. At the cross, it was "PAID IN FULL."

4. I GET JOY WHEN I THINK ABOUT // HEBREWS 12:1-2

This joy that I have, the world did not give to me, and the world cannot take it away. This is the testimony of someone who has joy on the inside. It's the type of joy that removes you from being affected by the external happenings around you. This must be the joy that the writer of the book of Hebrews refers to when he says, "keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2).

Jesus teaches us to focus beyond whatever we are going through and look to Him. His joy is our strength.

5. OVERCOMER // JOHN 16:32-33

It is believed that the roar of the lion has such a powerful impact on its surroundings that it strikes a disturbing fear throughout the animal kingdom. Jesus, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah (Rev. 5:5), does the same thing and more! The roar of Scripture can address any anxiety, nervousness, worry, uneasiness, or restlessness. When struck with such a feeling, the best thing to do listen for the roar of truth of God's word. Jesus said concerning troubling times, "I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. You will have suffering in this world. Be courageous! I have conquered the world" (John 16:33). The enemy has already been defeated.

We do not fight for victory but from victory. As He has overcome, we too are overcomers!