

Luke 23:20-46 // Cursed on the Tree

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[0 : 00] Luke 23, starting at verse 20. Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. But they kept shouting, crucify him, crucify him.

! But with loud shouts, they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided to grant their demand. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will.

As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus.

A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned and said to them, Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me.

[1 : 23] Weep for yourselves, and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.

Then, they will say to the mountains, Fall on us, and to the hills, cover us. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks so much, Ruth, for reading, and let me add my welcome to you as well.

And let's pray and ask for God's help as we come to his words. Heavenly Father, we come before you today, and ask that your Holy Spirit would be powerfully at work amongst us.

We pray that you'd be reminding us of that singular cost of Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

And would you impress on us, and would you impress on us, your deep love for us, and would you move us in our hearts and minds to reflect on all that, and move us to worship your Son, our Lord Jesus, in whose name we pray.

[2 : 41] Amen. I'm just going to read out that last bit of Luke again. Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.

Then they will say to the mountains, Fall on us, and to the hills, cover us. Or if the people do these things, when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?

Well, we've just heard the account of Jesus being led to his death. A real man, in a real place, at a real moment in history.

He's condemned by a Roman governor, led outside the city, and crucified. Those are the facts.

And on one level, Good Friday is very simple. Jesus died. But the question is, what did it mean?

[3 : 51] Why has the cross, an instrument of execution, become the symbol of the Christian faith? Why do we gather year after year, on Good Friday, to remember it?

Well, we're going to answer that question, by tracing one theme, through the Bible. A thread that runs, right from the beginning, to the cross.

So we're not going to be staying, in Luke's account, the whole time, but everything that we do say, will help us, to understand, what is happening here. Because the Bible, insists, that something more, is happening here, than meets the eye.

Not just a death, death, but a saving death. Not just suffering, but something significant, being accomplished. And even in, the reading we've just had, there is a moment, that hints at this.

As Jesus is led away, he turns and says, if they do these things, when the tree is green, what will happen, when it is dry? Well let me just tell you, it's one of those verses, you think you know a passage, and then you realise, you've never really noticed, that line before.

[5 : 08] At least that was my, experience, of not being in Luke's account, of Jesus' passion, for a little bit. And I found that quite, striking. It's a striking saying, it's perhaps even, a little bit puzzling.

But the picture is, simple, green wood, does not burn easily, and dry wood does. And Jesus is basically saying, if this happens, to the innocent one, the green tree, then what will happen, when judgment, ultimately falls, on the guilty?

And at the very least, he is telling us this, what is happening here, has something to do, with the fire, of divine judgment. So this isn't just, a miscarriage, of Roman justice, something much deeper, is taking place.

And that, raises a question for us, if this is about, judgment, then what exactly, is happening to Jesus, on the cross? The Apostle Paul, gives us, an answer.

He writes, in Galatians chapter 3, so we might just want, to turn there, you can find that, on page 1170, in the church Bibles, Galatians chapter 3, verse 13.

[6 : 43] Galatians 3, 13. Christ redeemed us, from the curse, of the law, by becoming, a curse for us. For it is written, cursed is everyone, who is hung, on a pole, or hanged, on a tree.

That's a staggering, claim. Not just that, Christ suffered for us, not just even, that he died for us, but that he became, a curse, for us.

And so, if we're going to understand, the meaning of the cross, if we're going to understand, what is happening here, then we need to understand, that word, curse. And it's not, a word we use, terribly often maybe, it's not, a comfortable word, but according to the Bible, this is not a small part, of what's happening, at the cross.

It's at the very, heart of it. Jesus became, a curse. So what does that mean? Where does it come from? Because unless, we understand, the curse, we will never, understand and appreciate, the cross.

So before we come, back to the cross, we're going to, go back, back to the beginning, to see, where the curse, comes from, what it really is, and why it matters.

[8 : 03] And only then, will we begin, to understand, what Jesus was doing, when he went, to the cross. So we've begun, to ask the question, what was happening, at the cross.

And Christians, have been asking, the same question, down through the centuries. And one of the ways, the church, has answered it, is through something, called a catechism. A series of questions, and answers, that help us, to understand, what we believe.

And the words, that will appear, on the screen, are taken from, the Heidelberg Catechism. And they, draw out the meaning, of the Apostles Creed, that we said, together, earlier.

So I'm going to, ask the question, and then, you're all, going to respond, with the words, in bold. So what do you, understand, by the words, suffered?

That during, his whole life, on earth, but especially, at the end, Christ sustained, in body and soul, the wrath of God, against the sin, of the whole, human race.

[9 : 13] This he did, in order that, by his suffering, as the only, atoning sacrifice, he might deliver us, body and soul, from eternal, condemnation, and gain for us, God's grace, righteousness, and eternal, life.

Our next reading, is from Genesis, chapter 3, and we'll start, at verse 14. So the Lord God, said to the snake, because you, have done this, cursed are you, above all livestock, and all wild animals. You will crawl, on your belly, and you will eat dust, all the days, of your life. And I will put enmity, between you, and the woman, between your offspring, and hers.

He will crush, your heads, and you will strike, his heel. To the woman, he said, I will make your pains, in childbearing, very severe.

With painful labor, you will give birth, to children. Your desire, will be for your husbands, and he will rule, over you. To Adam, he said, because you listened, to your wife, and ate fruit, from the tree, about which I commanded you, you must not eat, from it.

[10 : 26] Cursed is the ground, because of you. Through painful toil, you will eat food, from it, all the days, of your life. It will produce thorns, and thistles for you, and you will eat, the plants, of the fields.

By the sweat, of your brow, you will eat your foods, until you return, to the ground, since from it, you were taken. From dust you are, and to dust, you will return.

Then skipping, to verse 22. And the Lord God said, the man has now become, like one of us, knowing goods, and evil. He must not be allowed, to reach out his hands, and take also, from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever.

So the Lord God, banished him, from the garden of Eden, to work the ground, from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side, of the garden of Eden, cherubim, and a flaming sword, flashing back and forth, to guard the way, to the tree of life.

Thanks Robbie. Well, to understand the cross, we really have to go, all the way back, to the beginning, to where the story starts. And the Bible, begins in a garden.

[11 : 36] And in that garden, God made all kinds of trees. But in the middle of the garden, God placed two. The tree of life, and the tree of the knowledge, of good and evil.

And it is there, at the foot, of that second tree, that everything, begins to go wrong. God had spoken clearly, in Genesis 2, 16.

You are free to eat, from any tree in the garden. But you mustn't eat, from the tree of the knowledge, of good and evil. For when you eat from it, you will certainly die.

But of course, Adam and Eve, listen to the serpent. They take, they eat, they rebel. And in that moment, sin enters, the world. And with sin, comes the curse.

Not merely, consequences, but God's judgment, on a world, that has turned itself, away from him. The relationship, with God, is broken.

[12 : 36] They hide from him. They experience shame, and they're, driven out, of the garden. And you can hear, the curse unfold, in the very words, of the text.

So to the serpent, in chapter 3, 14. Cursed are you. I will put enmity between you, and the woman, and between your offspring, and hers.

Now even here, there is a promise. The first promise, in the Bible, of a rescuer, one who will come, from the woman, who will crush the serpent.

And then the curse, reaches into human life, itself. To the woman, God says, I will make your pains, and childbearing, very severe.

And from the line, of this woman, centuries later, Mary brought forth, in pain, the one, who would reverse, the curse, and bear, our pain.

[13 : 36] To the man, verse 17, cursed, is the ground, because of you. Through painful toil, you will eat food from it. It will produce, thorns, and thistles for you.

By the sweat, of your brow, you will eat your food. Work, becomes toil. Life, becomes burdensome. And at the center, of it all, is this. For dust you are, and to dust, you will return. This is what it means, to live, in a cursed, world.

And I'm conscious, that for some of us here, we have been affected, profoundly, by that loss, even this year.

And, we pray that, God would use, our time now, as we reflect, on the cross, to remind us, that there is life, beyond the grave.

[14 : 36] But this is what it means, to be under the curse, to live, in a withered, world, where everything, is now marked, by sin, frustration, and death.

To live, east of Eden, cut off, from the tree of life. And this is not, just their story, it's our story, too. We live, in this world, we know, this world, we share, in this condition, we know something, of the curse.

So when the Bible, speaks about the curse, this is what it means, God's judgment, on sin. A world, that is, no longer, the way it should be.

Lives, that are no longer, the way, they're supposed to be lived. And unless we understand this, we will never understand, what Jesus, was doing, on the cross.

Well, we've just, sung, of, finding refuge, in Christ. And now, we're going to say together, how that refuge, was secured, as we return, to the catechism.

[15 : 44] Why did Christ, suffer, under Pontius Pilate, as judge? So that he, though innocent, might be condemned, by an earthly judge, and so free us, from the severe judgment, of God, that was to follow us.

And now, we're going to return, to the scriptures, to hear, them explain that truth, more fully. So I'm going to invite, up, Yvonne now, to read from us, from Galatians, chapter 3.

Galatians, chapter 3, starting at verse 10. For all who rely, on the works of the law, are under a curse, as it is written, cursed is everyone, who does not continue, to do everything, written in the book, of the law.

Clearly, no one, who relies on the law, is justified, before God, because the righteous, will live, by faith. The law, is not based on faith.

On the contrary, it says, the person, who does these things, will live by them. Christ, redeemed us, from the curse, of the law, by becoming, a curse for us.

[16:57] For it is written, cursed is everyone, who is hung, on a pole. He redeemed us, in order, that the blessing, given to Abraham, might come, to the Gentiles, through Christ Jesus, so that by faith, we might receive, the promise, of the spirit.

And so now, we come back, to the cross. The Bible begins, and ends, of the tree of life, prominent in the middle, of the Bible, the cross, the tree of death. So we come back, to the hill, back to the scene, where we heard, in the beginning, this afternoon, the innocent man, declared again, and again, to have done, nothing wrong, nothing that deserves, to lead to his death, led out there, to be crucified.

We've seen, where the curse, comes from, where it originates. A world, turned away, from God, a world, marred by sin, frustration, and death.

And we've acknowledged, our part, in that story. Galatians, chapter 3, verse 10, says, all who rely, on works of the law, are under, a curse.

In other words, if we think, we can fix ourselves, if we think, we can make ourselves, right with God, by ourselves, if we think, that we can be good enough, we cannot.

[18:29] Our works, will never work. We are not, the solution. Here's the good news, verse 13. Christ redeemed us, from the curse, of the law, by becoming, a curse, for us.

This, is, the heart, of the cross. Not just, that Christ suffered, not even just, that he died, but that he became, a curse, for us, for each, of us, in our place, on our behalf.

Jesus, is our substitute, on the cross. Now we've already, seen a picture, of that, in our first reading, a guilty man, is released, and Jesus, takes his place.

The innocent one, condemned, so that the guilty, can go free. On the cross, Jesus took, what belonged, to us. Our sin, our guilt, our curse, so that we may receive, what belongs, to him.

His righteousness, his blessing, his spirit. Or as Paul says, elsewhere, God made him, who had no sin, to be sin, for us, so that in him, we might become, the righteousness, of God.

[19:54] But how? How did he, become a curse? Why a cross? Well the answer, lies deep, in the Old Testament. In Galatians, chapter 3, verse 13, Paul is quoting, Deuteronomy.

Cursed is everyone, who is hanged, on a tree. To be lifted up, and exposed, on a tree, was a sign, that someone, stood under the curse, of God, stood under the judgment, of God.

So the cross, isn't accidental. It's not, merely, Roman execution. This, is a curse, bearing, tree.

And on that tree, Jesus, takes the curse, and becomes, a curse, for us. So let's think, back to the garden.

What did that, curse, look like? So I think, one of the, most, poignant aspects, of Jesus' work, of redemption, on the cross, is how, Jesus fulfills, the curse, pronounced, over the man, back in, the garden, of Eden.

[21:07] Remember, the words, of the curse. By the sweat, of your brow. And in the garden, of Gethsemane, as Jesus begins, to face the cross, he enters, into the toil, of the curse.

Luke, in his, gospel account, tells us, his sweat, was like drops, of blood, falling, to the ground. As Matthew, Henry, a commentator, puts it, sweat, came in, with sin, and was, a branch, of the curse. And therefore, when Christ, was made a curse, for us, he underwent, a grievous, sweat. The ground, will produce, thorns, thorns, and thistles.

And as Jesus suffers, a crown of thorns, is pressed in, on his head. And again, Matthew Henry writes, thorns came in, with sin, therefore, Christ, being made, a curse, for us, and dying, to remove, the curse, from us, felt the pain, and smart, of those, very thorns.

And at the center, of it all, death. Dust you are, and to dust, you shall return. And on the cross, Jesus, breathes, his last.

[22:40] The Lord of life, enters, into death. He's not simply, near the curse. Jesus is not simply, affected, by the curse.

He, takes it, upon himself. You know, it strikes me, that the one, who hangs there, on the tree, is no stranger, to wood.

When Jesus, began his, public ministry, people said, isn't this, the carpenter? Isn't this, the son, of the carpenter? See, before the crowds, before the teaching, before the miracles, he worked, with his hands.

The hands, that are nailed, to the tree, are hands, that have shaped, wood. Hands, that know, its grain, its weight, its texture.

And more than that, these are hands, of the creator, the one, through whom, all things, are made. The one, who made the trees, themselves, from which, this very cross, was cut.

[23 : 52] And now, those hands, are pierced, and fixed, to, the crudest, joinery, imaginable. Wood, joined to wood, not crafted, for beauty, not made, for comfort, but fashioned, as an instrument, of execution.

The creator, nailed, to a dead piece, of his own, creation. And so, it's, it's there, there, on the tree, that he becomes, a curse, for us.

The author, of life, becomes, inanimate, on a piece, of dry, wood. But what does that mean?

What does it mean, for Jesus, to be cursed, to experience, God's, curse? Well, think of its opposite, to be blessed.

The Lord, bless you, and keep you. The Lord, make his face, to shine upon you, and be gracious, to you. The Lord, lift up his countenance, upon you, and give you, peace.

[25 : 08] That's the best description, of what it is, to be blessed, in the Old Testament. To bless, to be blessed, is to have God's, face, shine upon you, to know his favor, to have peace, with God.

To be cursed, is the opposite. The Lord, curse you, and forsake you. The Lord, make his face, frown upon you, and be angry, and be angry, with you.

The Lord, turn his back, upon you, and show you, wrath. That, was the experience, of Jesus, on the cross.

On the cross, the curse, that belonged to us, falls, on him. As Isaiah prophesied, he was wounded, for our transgressions, he was crushed, for our iniquities, the punishment, that brought us, peace, was upon him, and by his wounds, we are healed.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, and the Lord, has laid on him, the iniquity, of us all.

[26 : 22] This is what happened, at the cross. Christ, became the curse, so that we might receive, the blessing.

So instead of being cast out, we are brought in. Instead of death, we are given life. Instead of the curse, we are blessed, we have peace, with God, we have God's face, shine upon us.

And all of it, is found, in him. Not by our works, not by our performance, not by what we do, but by trusting, in the one, who hung, upon, the cursed tree.

And we are going to respond, together, with these words, from the catechism. Is it, significant, that he, was crucified, instead of dying, some other way?

Yes. By this, I am convinced, that he shouldered the curse, which lay on me, since death, by crucifixion, was cursed, by God.

[27 : 34] This is Luke, 23, verses 44 to 46. It was now, about noon, and darkness, came over the whole land, until three, in the afternoon, for the sun, stopped shining, and the curtain, of the temple, was torn in two.

Jesus called out, with a loud voice, Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit. When he had said this, he breathed his last.

that was the past, that was the past, that was the past, that was the past, that was the past, that was the past, that was the past, that was the past, that was the past, that was the past, that was the past, that was the past, that was the past, that was the past, that was the past, that was the past, that was the past, that was the past,