

Luke's Gospel Ch. 23:44-56 **Jesus' death and burial**

[New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

When Luke began his gospel, he said that he wanted to “set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us.” He wanted to write an orderly account to Theophilus so that he would know the certainty of those things in which he was instructed.

We've been going through Luke's orderly account over quite a long period now on Truth for Today. If you want to catch up on some of the previous talks in this series, you can check them out on the Truth for Today website. Over the course of the series, we've learnt about the birth of the Lord Jesus, we've seen Jesus as a boy in the temple. We've followed His early ministry in Galilee and Nazareth. We've heard about the wise teaching of the Lord. We've read about Him performing great miracles, healing many people. We've heard about dead people raised to life. And Luke said it's all true! Luke wanted Theophilus to know that all these things truly happened.

But we've now come to the most crucial part of Luke's Gospel, certainly in terms of the impact on the whole world of the events described. Today we'll consider Luke chapter 23 verses 44-56. We'll read about the death of the Lord Jesus on the cross at Calvary. We've been building up to this point over the past two weeks whilst we've been considering the earlier part of Luke 23. We started off two weeks ago learning about the Lord Jesus in His trial before Pilot and Herod. Last week we made the journey from the trials to Calvary, and read those moving words in verse 33:

“When they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him.”

Think about that! Jesus, who Luke has spent 22 chapters describing, not as a super-villain, but as the kindest and most amazing Man ever to live, was put on a cross. He was mocked by the soldiers and even by one of the criminals crucified alongside Him. It's certainly not the ending you might have expected as you read through Luke's orderly account. Except that there had been hints all through for attentive readers. In chapter 9 verse 22 Jesus said:

“The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.”

In verse 44 Jesus went on to say,

“Let these words sink down into your ears for the Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men.”

There had been signs for those able to pick up on them that something significant was coming. And so we come to our passage for today, from verse 44 to the end of chapter 23. Let's listen to what Luke has to say in his orderly account:

“Now it was about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. Then the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was torn in two. And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, He said, “Father, ‘into Your hands I commit My spirit.’” Having said this, He breathed His last. So when the centurion saw what had happened, he glorified God, saying, “Certainly this was a righteous Man!” And the whole crowd who came together to that sight, seeing what had been done, beat their breasts and returned. But all His acquaintances, and the women who followed Him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things. Now behold, there was a man named Joseph, a council member, a good and just man. He had not consented to their decision and deed. He was from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, who himself was also waiting for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen, and laid it in a tomb that was hewn out of the rock, where no one had ever lain before. That day was the Preparation, and the Sabbath drew near. And the women who had come with Him from Galilee followed after, and they observed the tomb and how His body was laid. Then they returned and prepared spices and fragrant oils. And they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment.”

Sometimes when you read a book or watch a movie you can sense the tension building as the plot moves towards the most significant point. Everything gets more and more dramatic. In movies, the crucial plot moment is characterised by all the special effects and loudest soundtracks. But that doesn't really happen here.

I've no doubt that Luke described in the verses that we've read together the most monumental moment in all of human history. There never was before, there never has been since, and there never will be in the future a more significant moment for us than the events Luke described in chapter 23. And yet, it's all a bit underwhelming isn't it. Luke's account is almost surprising in how little he actually says about the Lord on the cross. It's as if he states the bare minimum of details, in the simplest of words possible and then moved on to describe how various groups of people responded to the Lord's death.

I'm sure that was deliberate. The cross, the moment when the Lord Jesus gave Himself for the sins of mankind, wasn't something to be watched for entertainment, to gratify the desire for excitement or entertainment in the minds of the reader. These were truly awful moments for the Lord. Highly significant for us, certainly, but to be viewed with a sense of reverence and awe. Yet even in these seemingly simple statements and brief descriptions of the Lord's death, I think there are things to help us. So today, I'd like to spend a bit of time in verses 44-46 to notice three features of the Lord's death that I hope will prompt in our hearts a fresh appreciation for Him and cause us to respond to Him in worship. Then we'll spend the rest of our time in verses 47-56 looking at how different people responded to the death of the Lord Jesus. My prayer is that our study will challenge each of us about our devotion to the Lord Jesus, who endured the awfulness of the cross for our sakes.

First then, let's start in verse 44. Luke records that there were three hours of darkness, from the sixth hour to the ninth hour. This was certainly a supernatural kind of darkness. It wouldn't normally be dark at that time of day. Some Bible teachers have suggested that these 3 hours were when Jesus bore the wrath of God for our sins, and therefore God sent the darkness to hide those hours from man's view. That's an interesting speculation but we don't know for certain from the Scriptures. Certainly those who watched this event at the time must have wondered what was going on as darkness covered the earth for 3 hours.

Whatever the reason we can't help but be reminded of the irony of this scene. John records that Jesus described Himself as the "Light of the world" who had come to give people the "light of life." But here in Luke 23 we have a scene of strange darkness. John began his gospel by saying that Jesus was a light shining in the darkness but the darkness could not comprehend it. Jesus was in the world but the world did not know Him. Jesus Himself summed this up in John 3, when He said,

"This is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." Jesus perceptively added that "everyone practising evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed."

And so here we are in Luke 23 verse 44, darkness was over the whole world. Jesus had come into the world. He had gone about doing good. And still, men wanted to kill him. They preferred darkness, rather than the light Jesus brought. At this monumental moment, when the Lord was proving how much He loved mankind, by dying on the cross for them, there was darkness. It's true that the cross was all planned by God as part of His great plan of salvation. But there is a certain sense in which v.44 highlights the darkness and sinfulness of mankind to its fullest sense in their rejection of the Lord Jesus. There was darkness over all the earth as Jesus died.

If verse 44 is very sombre by reminding us of the sinfulness of mankind, then second, verse 45 brings in a ray of hope. The sun was darkened and the veil of the temple was torn in two. Why does Luke record this detail? The veil was a really large curtain that separated off the most holy part of the temple. Only the high priest could go into that part, as that was where they would intercede with God on sinful man's behalf.

This system dated back to the tabernacle, that the people of Israel carried around with them in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. The tabernacle was a tent essentially that was a predecessor of the temple that King Solomon built many years later. In the tabernacle there was also a curtain blocking entry into the holiest part. Only the high priest could go in, once a year to offer blood from the sacrifices made both for his own sins and the sins of the people. In Hebrews chapter 9, the writer explains the significance of this curtain, the Holy Spirit was indicating "that the way into the Holiest was not yet made manifest."

The veil was a constant reminder that there was an obstacle keeping mankind out of the presence of God. Access was forbidden. But Luke records that when the Lord died on the cross, the veil of the temple was torn in two. This was no flimsy curtain. It was huge and thick. And Matthew says in his gospel that the curtain tore from top to bottom. This was no accident. Surely God was indicating to all who would listen that the way to God was now open. Jesus had died to open up a new and living way of access to God. Through Jesus we can have boldness to approach God. So Luke may be quiet about the details of the Lord's death on the cross. But isn't it wonderful that he records for us this reminder that it's now possible to approach God?

If you're listening today and you are a Christian, I want to ask you if you're taking advantage of this wonderful truth? Hebrews 10, again takes up this theme and states that Christians do have boldness to enter God's presence; exhorts its readers to "draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith." In chapter 4 we're encouraged to "come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need." The death of our Lord Jesus has given those who have faith in Him, the opportunity to come boldly into God's presence to ask for fresh grace to help each day. We can draw near to God. So how much have I used this great privilege today? How much have you? To make a metaphor of Luke 23:45, God didn't tear the veil of the temple so that men and women could stay standing on the outside!

Let's keep moving in Luke 23. We come thirdly to verse 46, and hear Jesus crying out with a loud voice "Father, into Your hands, I commit My spirit." After crying this, Jesus breathed His last. I

can't help but admire the Lord's composure and clarity in these awful moments. The pain of enduring the cross for those three hours and more must have been intense and excruciating. But there is such clarity in the Lord's words. He is clear about who He is speaking to – "Father, into your hands." He is clear about what He is about to do – "I commit My spirit." It wasn't as if the Lord gave up here, finally succumbing to the pain of crucifixion. I'm reminded of the Lord's words in John 10,

"No one takes [My life] from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again."

At that moment, the Lord voluntarily laid down His life. It could be no other way. Death had no power over the Lord Jesus. He was unique in that respect, as in so many others. No doubt many others had died of crucifixion struggling to hold on to the last breath before passing away in a bit of a whimper. But here the Lord chose to lay down His life. Why would He do that? Can't you hear the Lord's words in Mark 10,

"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Or His words in John 10,

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep."

If you're a Christian listening today, don't these verses remind us to appreciate "the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" as Paul wrote in Galatians 2. Don't they make us appreciate Jesus, "who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works", like Paul reminded Titus in Titus 2.

So I've spoken at length about verses 44-46 of Luke 23. We've been reminded of the darkness of this scene, when the sinfulness of man was on display. But we've seen hope of a new access to God, and we've admired the Lord voluntarily giving up His life for our sakes. The details Luke gives in his orderly account may be brief, but my prayer is that for each of you listening today, reflecting on these verses would prompt us to appreciate our Lord Jesus even more, and respond to Him with thankfulness and in worship.

For the rest of our time today, I want us to think a little bit about the ways in which people respond to the death of the Lord Jesus. You see, Luke describes quite a few different people, or groups of people in the rest of chapter 23 and they all responded differently to what they observed. It's probably not so different today. Lots of us will have heard the verses from Luke 23 we've read today and I guess will have reacted very differently to them.

In verse 47 we get the reaction of the centurion who oversaw the crucifixion. When he witnessed what had happened, he said, "Certainly this was a righteous Man!" Matthew and Mark in their gospels record the centurion as saying, "Truly this Man was the Son of God", so maybe this centurion genuinely came to saving faith. Luke's ordered account of the facts clearly notes that this centurion, who likely had seen many crucifixions before, found something different about the Lord's death and that should surely make us stop and take note. I've said that the death of the Lord Jesus was the most monumental moment in the whole of human history. And I want to suggest to you that we can't really be neutral on this. Either the centurion was right when he notes there was something different about this death, and that the Man he had just seen crucified was none other than the Son of God, or he was wrong? So which is it? If there is anyone listening today who isn't yet a Christian, I want to thank you for listening this far. And I want to remind you again of the fact that in today's section of Luke's gospel we've come to the part where the Lord

Jesus voluntarily laid down His life to take the judgement our sins deserved. That's the claim of the Bible – that Christ died for our sins. That Jesus died so that we could have life. And my challenge to you, and my prayer for you is that you would accept these truths and realise like the centurion that Jesus was no ordinary man. He was the Son of God. And He died for your sin!

Then in verse 48 we get another group of people, the whole crowd. They responded differently. They saw the Lord dying and probably acknowledged something was a bit strange about it all, but then Luke records they “beat their breasts and returned.” It's as if they saw all the events and then just turned round and went home. Then they got on with their lives. No mention of them being affected like the centurion was. No sign of the devotion we'll see in others later in the chapter. They just return to their homes. So many respond like this to the message of the Bible. And it's tragic really. They had just witnessed the Son of God dying for the sins of the world – enduring the wrath of God for their sake. Unmoved by what they saw, they went home. So many respond like this to the message of the Bible and it's tragic. If you're listening today and you're not a Christian, don't be like that. Don't merely hear about the fact that the Lord Jesus loves you and gave Himself for you then just turn around and go away unmoved by it all. Don't hear about the Lord Jesus then just go and get on with life as normal.

A group of women is mentioned next in verse 49, and then they come up again in verses 55 and 56. We've already met some of this group of women in Luke 8 where they are described as those who travelled with Jesus and provided for Him. They clearly loved the Lord and it must have been awful for them to have watched the events unfold at Calvary. Luke records that they watched from a distance, and then that they followed Joseph to see the tomb where he buried the Lord. Then they went back to their homes to prepare burial spices and fragrant oils so that as soon as the Sabbath was over they could go back to the grave and honour the Lord in His death. We have to admire the devotion of these women. Sure they hadn't realised that the Lord would rise again, but none of the disciples really had at that point. But they followed the Lord and wanted to do what they could to honour Him. Possibly they were the last at the cross and the first at the tomb on Easter morning. And they were rewarded by being amongst the first to see the Lord after He rose from the dead. But that's for next week. For now, let's just be challenged by these women's love for the Lord and their devotion to Him. And let's resolve to follow the Lord and do whatever we can to honour Him.

Finally we get Joseph of Arimathea in verses 50-54. He was a member of the Jewish religious council but hadn't consented to their decision when they tried the Lord before His crucifixion. Joseph was waiting for the kingdom of God, perhaps a little like Simeon was back in Luke chapter 2. Joseph was a secret disciple like Nicodemus, another of the council who had been changed by meeting with the Lord. Joseph had a new grave and asked Pilate for permission to bury the Lord there. I wonder if he knew that he was fulfilling Old Testament prophecy when he did this? Isaiah 53:9 says that “they made His grave with the wicked, but with the rich at His death.” Joseph, a rich man, gave his burial slot for the Lord. The writer Warren Wiersbe made an interesting suggestion that perhaps Joseph had prepared for this moment by reading Old Testament Scriptures about how the Messiah would live and die and realising that these were describing Jesus, and that perhaps he had the tomb ready just for the right moment and that is why he was able to act so swiftly in this situation. I find that a really interesting suggestion, but we just don't know for certain. For whatever reason, Joseph was now willing to step out of the shadows and publicly show his allegiance to the Lord Jesus. Will we respond like that?

So then, lots of different responses to the Lord's death. I pray we'll be like Joseph and the women who followed the Lord. Let's reflect on the death of the Lord described in verses 44-46 of Luke 23 and as we appreciate the Lord more, respond like the centurion, like Joseph and like the women. You see, we have something better than they all had at the end of Luke 23. We get to read Luke 24 and learn the glorious truth that Jesus rose from the dead. Luke 23 ends in a sad manner –

devoted followers honouring their dead friend. But Luke 24 is wonderful! So tune in next week to hear more about that. Better still, if you can't wait a week, why not read Luke 24 now!

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on "Luke 23, verses 44-56, talk T1222.

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1.