

## Luke Chapter 23

We are about to consider the account of the Cross as given to us by Luke the beloved physician.

We have, of course, in the 4 gospels four different accounts of the events that took place at Calvary. No two writers are exactly the same, for each gives an account that is in line with the purpose of his writing the gospel story.

Mark, typically, gives us a very brief account of the Cross, just as he gives a relatively brief, but fast moving account the Lord's life. It is said that 95% of what we find in Mark you can find in the other 3 gospels whereas 95% of what is found in John's gospel is unique to him. Mark is still a very useful gospel for the Bible student for it is written in strict chronological order and is therefore useful in studying Luke who frequently writes in a moral order of events. One of the best ways to study any of the gospels is just to sit down and compare how all four writers treat a subject or a character or an event. The differences often bring out the meaning.

The one thing that stands out in Mathew's account of the Cross is the loud shout uttered by the Lord Jesus as He dies. Eccles 8:4 says, "Where the word of a king is, there is power." In Matthew, more than in any other gospel, amazing things happen when the word of the king comes from the Cross – the veil was rent, the earth did quake, the rocks were rent, and graves were opened. Even though the Bible says that He was crucified in weakness, the natural, the religious, and the spiritual worlds all responded to the word of the king.

In John's gospel, we see the glory of the Cross. It might seem that there could be no glory in a Cross, but in John there is no mention of Simon the Cyrenian bearing His Cross, no mention of the thieves or of the taunts of men. The Roman soldiers are mentioned but only in so far as we see scriptures being fulfilled by their actions.

But here in Luke 23, we see two things above all, which are typical of this gospel. One is the grace of God, as seen by the Lord's dealings with the soldiers and with the thief. The other is, as He dies, the dependant Man committing Himself into the hands of His Father.

But we might well be asking, why should we be looking at the Cross as a ministry subject. Should it not be reserved for gospel preaching only. But there at least two reasons why we should be looking at the Cross as Christians. One is purely for devotional reasons for it tells us much about the character of the One who loved us and gave Himself for us. The other reason is doctrinal. We must learn to distinguish between the Cross of Christ, and the death of Christ. We might be tempted to ask, "Are they not the self-same thing?". In I Cor 15, Paul defines his gospel when he writes, " Christ died for our sins". Not crucified for our sins, but died for our sins. Elsewhere we read that Christ died for the ungodly. The wages of sin is death, and those wages had to be paid. The debt had to be settled, either by ourselves or by another. We needed someone to

pay our debt hence Christ died for our sins. His death is the surety of our salvation. It is also our surety in the day of the Rapture. We are all going up, without exception, because Christ "died for us", so that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him. It will not be dependent then upon our faithfulness on that day. Regardless of our condition, we shall be raptured because "Christ died for us".

The death of Christ therefore is the basis for the great doctrinal truths of the Bible, so where does the Cross come in. The Cross is there to separate us from everything that would stumble us or be unhelpful to us in our Christian pathway. What we see pictorially in the gospels is taught doctrinally in the epistles. A number of things are said to be crucified :-

#### 1. The "I" of Gal 2:20.

Says Paul, "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live. Yet the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me". Paul has looked at the big "I" in his life ie self, and he has judged that the only place for it is the Cross. The Cross was a place of judgment. Anything put on a cross is under judgment. That is why in later years, we can see the total unselfishness of the apostle. Self had been judged. So how can a crucified man still live – by the faith of the son of God. Not simply faith in, but the faith of. Paul's claim then was that he was living by the same faith that marked the Son of God in his lifetime here.

And when we turn to Acts 27, who can doubt it. As he stands on a doomed ship, Paul stands up and says "I believe God". There were 276 people on board, some of whom were non-swimmers, yet Paul said every one will be saved although the ship will be lost. What an amazing claim, but it was fulfilled as he said, because Paul had the faith of the son of God.

#### 2. The flesh in Gal 5:24

"They that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the lusts thereof." In this chapter Paul lists the works of the flesh. Things that the flesh is prone to. How can we keep the flesh under control ?. By giving it the place it deserves – the Cross.

#### 3. The world in Gal 6:14

"The world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world".

The world will always make its appeal to the believer. It is full of pleasures which can be a snare. The only place for the world ? – a cross. This judgment of the world by the Christian has a double edged sword. If I put the world on a cross, then the world will put me on a cross. The Christian who has judged the world is no use to this world, and they will soon judge us as being of no value to them.

#### 4. The "old man" (Romans 6:6)

Paul also tells us that the Old Man has been crucified ie everything that would link us with our unconverted state. The only place for the Old Man is a Cross. We need to encourage the New Man.

Hence, everything that might hinder us is to crucified – the doctrinal value of the Cross.

What we see doctrinally in the epistles, we see practically in the gospels. The Cross of the Lord Jesus was surrounded by religious and political figures. We see in the Cross the indifference, the hatred, and the cruelty that the world had for the Saviour. The Cross, therefore, for us should be the great dividing line. We perhaps have heard of the Great Dividing Line in the American Rockies. A drop of rain falling on one side of the line will make its way to the Pacific, while only a few inches away another drop will make its way to the Atlantic. Our dividing line is the Cross. On the one hand, there is the world and its people – often intelligent, honest, upright people- but people of the world none the less. On the other hand, there is the Lord and all that belongs to Him.

So let us look at some of the details in this chapter, Luke 23. Some things in the chapter are unique to Luke, but we begin by looking at Simon the Cyrenian who is compelled to bear the Lord's Cross after Him. Every Jew would know the curse of a cross. "cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree". Hence they would not find a Jew who would volunteer for such a task. Neither would they compel a Jew to bear this cursed thing. So their eyes fall upon this man – Simon, a Cyrenian. A man from North Africa we believe. Perhaps a Gentile proselyte come to worship at Jerusalem. Mark's gospel adds two extra details – "Who passed by". He just happened to be, it seems, in the wrong place at the wrong time. But Mark also adds, "the father of Alexander and Rufus". One wonders if these two sons of Simon are here mentioned because they would be well known to the readers of Mark's gospel. Was it this incident, unfortunate at the time, that perhaps led to the salvation of Simon and his sons after him. We can only surmise.

From verse 27 to 31, we have the Lord's encounter with the daughters of Jerusalem. These women are wailing and lamenting Him, yet He rejects their tears. Why should this be ?. I wonder if they were but tears for the unfortunate victims of crucifixion. Would they perhaps have wept equally for the two thieves as they passed by. They were not tears for the Lord personally, but rather for the 3 victims, and for the suffering which they were about to endure. But the Lord adds a word of warning to the women – "Weep for yourselves and for your children". The Lord had already wept for Jerusalem and for its citizens. "How often would I have gathered thee.... But ye would not". They knew not the day of their visitation. The Lord knew of a future day when the city would be besieged and laid waste, just before His return in glory. The Lord quotes the words of Hosea 10:8 – " They shall say unto the mountains, Cover us : and to the hills, Fall on us". In Revelation, men will cry out, "Who shall save us from the face of Him who sits upon the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb". Have you ever seen an angry Lamb ?. We think of the gentleness of the lambs in the field. Yet the Lamb of God, the Saviour, will become the Judge of all the earth, when the world will experience the wrath of the Lamb". The women of verses 27-31 are to be contrasted with the women of verse 49. "And all His acquaintance and the women which followed Him from Galilee stood afar off, beholding these things." Here was genuine affection, real love for the Saviour. Perhaps as many as eight women were in this group. They had been healed by Him. Some like Mary Magdalene had had demons cast out from them. Their

lives had been transformed and they followed Him all the way from Galilee to the Cross. As they went, they ministered unto Him of their substance. They wanted to be where He was, and also to be able to give something back to Him. Their devotion exceeded that even of the disciples who forsook Him in Gethsemane and fled for their lives. Indeed, if we want to find in the gospels examples of devotion and worship, we look not to great men, not even to the disciples, but to three women. We have the woman of the city in Luke 7 who worshipped Him because of the forgiveness of her sins, Mary of Bethany who worshipped because she had sat at His feet (Luke 10) and witnessed the miracle of Lazarus being raised, and finally Mary Magdalene whose life had been transformed by the casting out of seven demons.

In verse 32, we have the first mention of the malefactors. As we think of these men, we think of the accuracy of the scriptures as they were fulfilled at Calvary. Isaiah 53 says "He was numbered with the transgressors and He made intercession for the transgressors". Other scriptures such as Zechariah spoke of the 30 pieces of silver that would be paid to the betrayer and that these 30 pieces of silver would be cast to the potter in the house of the Lord. All these details were fulfilled by Judas as he threw down the money in the temple. Psalm 22 and Psalm 69 also spoke of His sufferings on the Cross.

Hence what we see in Luke 23 is the transforming power of the Cross. The Cross separates the 2 thieves. One curses the Saviour – another receives the blessing of salvation. We will look more at the thief who was saved in a few moments. Indeed the salvation of the second thief divides the chapter. There are 5 groups of people mentioned up to verse 39, and the same 5 groups are represented after verse 40. The Cross makes all the difference.

In verse 33, we have by the way the only reference to Calvary in the 4 gospels. The word Calvary comes from the Latin word for a skull. The other 3 writers prefer to use the Hebrew word for a skull, Golgotha.

But now in verse 34, unique to Luke, we have the Lord's prayer for His tormentors. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do". This is typical of Luke's gospel. It is the gospel of the parables. The Good Samaritan, the invitation to the Great Supper (Come for all things are now ready), as well as the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the lost son. It is also the gospel of forgiveness – the paralytic man hears the words, "Son, thy sins be forgiven thee". The Lord says of the woman of the city who was a sinner, "Her sins which are many are forgiven her". It is the gospel of Zacchaeus, chief amongst the publicans. It is truly the gospel of the grace of God. But will this grace extend to cruel, heartless, soldiers who are in the process of driving nails through His hands and His feet, thus impaling Him on the Cross. Here is the greatest sin ever carried out against God. Yet the Saviour prays, "Father forgive them". He can forgive, because they were doing it ignorantly in unbelief. The nation of Israel were much more guilty than the Romans, and the apostles in the book of Acts declare the guilt of Israel in wilfully rejecting their Messiah. So, how did the soldiers react to the Lord's prayer – "And they parted his raiment amongst them, casting lots". We know, of course, that this was in fulfilment of Psalm 22, but it in know way sets aside the guilt of these men. Thus the Lord's last prayer for men was one of forgiveness, even for these soldiers. Luke also gives us the Lord's last miracle. Can you remember what it

was ?. He touched and healed the ear of Malchus in Gethsemane ie one of His captors.

We will return to the soldiers in verse 36, but next in verse 35, we have the people mentioned, presumably the common people. Luke says simply – “And the people stood beholding”. Can we possibly read more into these words. Do they not suggest idle curiosity perhaps, or maybe even callous indifference to the suffering of the Lord Jesus. When the Lord speaks of the yet future days of the Son of Man ie immediately preceding His return in glory to earth, He compares these days to two periods in the past. One is the days of Lot, when Sodom and Gomorrah were marked by wickedness and unnatural sexual behaviour. We have seen the increase ,yea, the public acceptance of such behaviour in our day. But the other comparison is the days of Noah. Strangely, the Lord’s comment about the days of Noah refers not to the wickedness of Noah’s day but rather to the indifference of men to divine things. They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage until the day that Noah entered into the ark – and the flood came and took them all away. They were so absorbed with the mundane things of life that they paid no heed to divinely given warnings of judgment. Noah, says Peter, was a preacher of righteousness. Such indifference to divine things is now endemic in Britain today.

We have said however that in Luke 23 we have a mirror image of the five groups of people mentioned. Just bas we have the women of Jerusalem contrasted with the faithful women of Galilee, so we have the people in verse 35 contrasted with the people mentioned later in verse 48. Here were now people who came and witnessed this sight, smote their breasts and returned. It is no longer indifference to the Cross, but rather deep feelings aroused by the Cross. We would not go so far as to say that these people were saved, but we see that the Cross had made deep impressions upon them. This has been true down through the centuries. Men have come, as it were, to the Cross and their souls have been moved to repentance. The smiting of the breasts is reminiscent of the publican in the parable of Ch 19 who could only but smite his breast and say, “God be merciful to me, a sinner”.

Next in the same verse, we have the rulers who derided Him. “Let Him save Himself, if He be Christ”. Here were religious men who professed to be waiting for the Messiah, yet rejected the One who hung upon the Cross. Yet again we have the contrast between these rulers and another ruler who comes to the scene. We are speaking now of Joseph of Arimathaea. A number of details are added about him, reminiscent of the details given to us about Anna in Luke 2. Both people are written in God’s book of remembrance, as we read of in Malachi. Joseph’s details are :-

1. Joseph
2. A counsellor
3. A good man
4. A just
5. Not consented to the counsel and deed of them
6. Of Arimathaea
7. Who himself waited for the kingdom of God

Others add :-

8. A rich man (Matt 28:57)
9. Who also himself was Jesus' disciple (Matt 28)
10. An honourable counsellor (Mk 15:43)
11. A disciple, but secretly for fear of the Jews. (Jn 19:38)

There are ten good things said about this man, and only one thing is said against him, that he was a secret disciple. He was a member of the Sanhedrim, the ruling council of the Jews. He had believed in the Lord, but through fear of the Jews, he had been unwilling to confess the Lord publicly. In John 7:48, the rulers said to the soldiers who had been sent to take the Lord Jesus, "Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on Him". Little did they know it but there were two believers in their ranks, Joseph and Nicodemus. Only Nicodemus speaks up on that occasion in John Ch 7, but not to confess Him as Lord, just to ask the question, "Doth our law judge any man before it hear him".

But God needed a man like Joseph to fulfil His purpose regarding the burial of His Son. The bodies of criminals might have been thrown into pauper's graves. But the Bible says in Isaiah 53:9, "And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death". In Luke 2, God used Caesar Augustus to issue a decree that would bring Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to fulfil the words of Mica 5:2, "And thou Bethlehem Ephratah, in the land of Judah.....out of thee shall he come forth unto me....". But now in Luke 23, at Calvary, God uses Joseph to fulfil the scripture regarding the Lord's burial. It would have to be a man like Joseph – rich enough to have had his own tomb prepared in the rock, rich enough to buy the linen clothes and the spices for the body : but also a man of sufficient reputation and authority to have access to Pilate when he begged the Lord's body.

I have no doubt that this incident would be costly both for Joseph and for Nicodemus. It would cost them their place on the Sanhedrim, it would cost them the respect of their fellows, and perhaps also it might cost them their wealth. But this is what the Cross is all about. It is about taking a stand for Jesus, even if it means taking a stand against the world.

So, we have had the women, the people, and the rulers. Now again in verse 36, we have the soldiers. "And the soldiers also mocked him, coming to Him and offering Him vinegar and saying, If thou be the King of the Jews, save thyself". Both the rulers and the thief spoke about Him being the Christ, but the Romans knew nothing of a Christ, a Messiah. Hence their taunt is regarding the king of the Jews. Here were men who had no regard for the man on the centre Cross. It was all in a day's work to them.

But yet again in Luke's account, we see the effect of the Cross. In verse 47, we read, " Now when the Centurion saw what was done, he glorified God saying, " Certainly this was a righteous man". In Matthew 27, the centurion goes even further when he says, "Truly this was the Son of God". What was it that so impressed this man. The Bible says, "When He saw what was done". He had seen those unnatural three hours of darkness on a bright April day. He heard the shout of the Saviour from the Cross – and saw and felt the results. The earth did quake and the rocks were rent. He had perhaps heard that earlier

prayer of the Lord, "Forgive them". He had perhaps heard other of those sayings from the Cross, such as the care taken by the Lord to commend His mother to the beloved disciple. God reaches most men through the preaching of the word, but where men have no bible, God can use other means to do His will. We have perhaps heard of conversion stories where God used supernatural means to bring a soul to repentance.

But last of all, we come to the two thieves. John doesn't mention them at all, for his purpose is to show, not the shame of the Cross, but rather the glory of the Cross. Matthew and Mark, however, record the fact that both thieves reviled the Lord Jesus. This was no doubt true at the beginning. But here in Luke, the gospel of the grace of God, only one thief rails on the Lord Jesus. The other rebukes him saying, "Dost not thou fear God". We again see the effect of the Cross. The second thief has been watching and listening to events as they unfold. Titles have been banded about – the Christ, the King, the Son of God. But like the centurion, he has been impressed by what has been taking place and he at last realises that all that has been said about the man on the centre Cross is true. He is the Christ, He is the King of Israel.

The thief also realises his own plight, he is only hours away from eternity. He is going to meet God, and he is filled with the fear of God and with his own guilt. Hence his appeal to the Lord Jesus, "Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom". Here indeed was a king with a kingdom, but a heavenly kingdom, not one pertaining to this world.

The story of the dying thief is often used as an illustration of the gospel, and what a perfect illustration it is. For it proves beyond doubt that salvation has nothing to do with how good we are, nor how bad we are, but depends entirely on faith in the Lord Jesus. Of course, we need to bring in the doctrine of the epistles. Paul's gospel was, "Christ died for our sins", while Peter says, "He bore our sins in His own body on the tree". God took the sins of the thief and transposed them to the head of His Son who paid the price for them in separation from God, death, and hell.

So how does the Lord respond to the condemned, self-confessed, criminal. "Today thou shalt be with me in Paradise". Adam lost Paradise because of one sin. Here is a thief with a multitude of sins, yet he is promised a place in Paradise. And what is Paradise? It is Eden, the garden of God. Just as John in his gospel speaks of an earthly Father's house ie the temple, so he also speaks of a heavenly Father's house. The Lord drove men out of the earthly house yet one day will return to receive men into the heavenly house. Paradise is spoken of in II Cor 12 as "the third heaven". In Gen 1:1 there are two heavens in God's creation, for the Hebrew word for heaven is dual. God (Elohim) is plural and the verb created is singular, so three persons acting as one created the two heavens of Gen 1:1. These would be the air around us and the heaven of the stars. The third heaven must therefore be the uncreated eternal dwelling place of God. Paul, I believe, was speaking about himself when he says he knew a man in Christ caught up to the third heaven "above fourteen years ago." Fourteen years before Paul wrote these words he was beaten and dragged out of the city of Lystra and left for dead. I believe it was then that his spirit was caught up to the third heaven. There he saw visions and revelations of the Lord and heard unspeakable words which it is not lawful for a man to

utter. It was perhaps this vision and these words that sustained Paul throughout his many trials and tribulations. A man who had been to Paradise knew what was at the end of the journey of life.

And what does Paradise mean to us today? It is the place into which saints that have died have entered. Their bodies remain in the grave, but soul and spirit have gone to Paradise, the garden of God. The souls there do not sleep as some have claimed, for we have seen the experience of Paul. We also hear the words of those souls under the altar in Rev 6, as they cry out for vengeance upon those who have taken their lives away. Hence saints in Paradise can see, hear, and speak and are fully conscious of everything around them in Paradise.

Can there be anything better than Paradise? I believe there is. Today in Paradise saints are incomplete for they have left their bodies on earth. After the Resurrection, they will put on a new body. Not the earthly tent-house of II Cor 5 which will be dissolved, but a building of God, eternal in the heavens. In Phil 3, Paul says that we will have a body like unto His glorious body. All that is true of the Resurrection body of the Lord Jesus will therefore be true of ours. His was a body that was recognisable – in John 20, the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. We therefore will know each other in that day. His was a body that was tangible, for in Matt 28, the women came and held Him by the feet. But His was a body without limitation. The doors were shut but Jesus came and stood in the midst in John Ch 20.

So, one day we will have a glorified body, but our final destiny will not be Paradise. When the Lord speaks of His coming again for us in John 14, He speaks of receiving us into the Father's house. "In my Father's house, there are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you." Even then, I believe, there is something better for us than those many mansions. The Lord said, "There are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you". The word for place is literally a little place, and brings with it the idea of a special place. The disciples were His little children, because they were dear to Him. Reserved for us in the Father's House is a special place which the Lord has gone to prepare for us.

But is the Father's House better than Paradise? The former is the Father's House, the latter is the garden of God. A man might feel honoured to receive an invitation to the Queen's garden party in London. When he gets there, he discovers he is one amongst hundreds. There are very few, however, who get an invite into the Queen's house to have tea with her there. In our bodies of glory, we are going to enter the Father's House, into that special place prepared by the Lord for His Church. What awaits us in the Father's house we can surmise from the parable of the prodigal son.

We can surely expect no less than what the prodigal received – a Father's welcome, the best robe, shoes on our feet, the ring on the finger, the feast, and the joy of the house.

So, what else is there of note in Luke 23? Surely His dying words are worthy of comment. Not here the loud shout of Matthew or the "it is finished" of John, but rather, "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit". As we say, this is typical of the dependent man of Luke's gospel. Only in Luke is the Lord praying at His baptism. Only in Luke is the Lord praying on the Holy Mount. And only in Luke does the Son commend His spirit to the Father as He dies.

But if this final prayer illustrates his dependent character as a man, it also shows his power as the Son of God. The Lord chooses the moment when He is going to die. In John's gospel, the final cry is, "It is finished". The work of salvation certainly was finished, but there is something even greater than salvation involved in that cry. The English words in our AV accomplished, fulfilled, and finished are all in fact translations of one single Greek word TETALESTAI, which means "fulfilled". The Lord said, "I thirst", and this time received the vinegar, in order that the scripture might be fulfilled. This is more than one single chapter and verse, but rather all the scripture ie every verse ever written about Him had now been accomplished. It is only then that the obedient Son can say "Fulfilled" and dismiss His spirit.

In Luke, the same moment is marked by the words, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit". The Lord has therefore fulfilled His own words when He said previously, "No man taketh my life from me. I lay it down of myself that I might take it up again." He did not die out of weakness, but as Matthew records, He cried with a loud voice. Indeed when Joseph went to beg the body of Jesus, Pilate marvelled if He were already dead and sent for the centurion to confirm His death. Crucifixion was a slow lingering death which lasted for not just hours but days. The victims eventually died from weakness and exhaustion. That is why the Jews besought Pilate that the legs might be broken to accelerate death, that the bodies might not remain on the cross on the Sabbath day. But the Lord pre-empted all the schemes of men when He commended His spirit to the Father.

The Bible says, "No man hath power in the day of his death, neither hath he power to retain his spirit". The moment of death is outwith our control. We can neither retain our spirit nor dismiss it at will. But the Saviour did, because He was not only the dependent man, He is also the man who is the Son of God.

So, this final cry in Luke's gospel demonstrates His dependence as a man, and yet His power as one who is divine. But it also establishes a third thing – His work as a priest. Would it have mattered if the Lord had died at the hands of the Roman soldier with the spear, or would it have mattered if His life had simply ebbed away as a result of the pain and the suffering of the Cross. I suppose the answer would be, "No". It would have been sufficient for us as sinners that one should die for our sins. But to have died at the hands of others would certainly not have fulfilled His own words, "No man taketh my life from Me". Nor would it have satisfied the fulfilment of His death being a voluntary offering. But most of all, the Bible could not have claimed that His death on the cross was a priestly work. The epistle to the Hebrews establishes two things regarding the Lord. One is that He Himself was the perfect sin offering, which never had to be repeated. But secondly, that He Himself was the priest who made the offering. "but this man, after that He had made one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down... ". Another verse says, "This He did once, when He offered up Himself". He was the priest after the pattern of Aaron, who offered up a sin offering when He offered up Himself. He could not therefore have died at the hands of others. He had to offer Himself to establish His priesthood. This also emphasises the principle that men had no part to play in the atoning work of Calvary. All the taunts and sneers of men during the first three hours showed their hatred towards Him, but played no part in the

atoning work of the Saviour.