

Luke 23:26-49: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Luke chapter 23 verses 26 to 49. And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross to carry it behind Jesus.

And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. But turning to them, Jesus said, Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.

For behold, the days are coming when they will say, Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed. Then they will begin to say to the mountains, Fall on us, and to the hills, Cover us.

For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry? Two others who were criminals were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called the skull, there they crucified him and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

And Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. And they cast lots to divide his garments, and the people stood by watching. But the ruler scoffed at him, saying, He saved others.

[1 : 06] Let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his chosen one. The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him some sour wine and saying, If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.

There was also an inscription over him, This is the king of the Jews. One of the criminals who were hanged rallied at him, saying, Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us.

But the other rebuked him, saying, Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds.

But this man has done nothing wrong. And he said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And he said to him, Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.

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, and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.

[2 : 09] And having said this, he breathed his last. Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, Certainly this man was innocent. And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts.

And all his acquaintances, and the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance watching these things. In Luke chapter 23, as Jesus is led out to his crucifixion, Simon of Cyrene takes up his cross and follows Jesus.

Notably, he's a Gentile. Simon of Bethsaida denies Jesus, but Simon of Cyrene follows him. At this point, when the twelve have largely abandoned Jesus, it is the unlikely disciples, converts and figures, along with the women that come to the foreground, people like Simon of Cyrene, the centurion, Joseph of Arimathea.

What is happening to Jesus is just the harbinger of more terrible things to come in Jerusalem, when its leaders have favoured the way of insurrection over the way of Jesus. Jesus is followed by a multitude and many women mourning and lamenting for him.

We might perhaps hear the voice of Zechariah chapter 12 verses 10 to 14 here. And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only son, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.

[3 : 38] On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Harad-Rimon, in the plain of Megiddo. The land shall mourn, each family by itself, the family of the house of David by itself, and their wives by themselves, the family of the house of Nathan by itself, and their wives by themselves, the family of the house of Levi by itself, and their wives by themselves, the family of the Shimeites by itself, and their wives by themselves, and all the families that are left, each by itself, and their wives by themselves.

Jesus addresses the women as daughters of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was often spoken of as a daughter in the prophets, and the city is represented by its women. Jesus presents his death as a foreshadowing of Israel's own fate.

The people following may weep for him, but they should recognize that Jerusalem as a whole will suffer the same fate in its time. He quotes Hosea chapter 10 verse 8, Jesus has led a way to be crucified with two criminals.

Luke has a much lighter narrative brushstroke than Matthew, for instance, but he wants us to notice prophecy being fulfilled in the background. Isaiah chapter 53 verse 12, for instance, One criminal is on his right and another on his left.

Jesus is like an enthroned king, flanked by others. If Simon of Cyrene illustrated discipleship in carrying the cross after Jesus, the criminals illustrate those positions that disciples that wish to be exalted must occupy.

[5 : 28] Jesus responds to the situation by prayer for the very people who are crucifying him. He intercedes for the transgressors. He appeals to the fact that their sin is unwitting, and this unwitting character of the people's sin is also asserted by the apostles in Acts chapter 3 verses 13 to 19.

The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him.

But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And his name, by faith in his name, has made this man strong whom you see and know.

And the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all. And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled.

Repent, therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out. They will have another chance. However, if they reject the message of the church, only certain judgment will await them.

[6 : 41] Jesus is here fulfilling his own teaching, given near the beginning of his ministry in Luke chapter 6, verses 27 to 29. But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you, to one who strikes you on the cheek, after the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic either.

In the dividing of his garments by lot, we again hear the voice of scripture, this time from Psalm 22, verse 18. They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.

Jesus is then mocked by the rulers, the soldiers, and even one of the criminals crucified alongside him. The mockers decrease in their social status, manifesting how humiliating Jesus' position is.

The mockery focuses upon Jesus' claim to be the Christ, and his supposed identity as a failed saviour. We might remember the challenge of Satan back in chapter 4, if you are the son of God, and hear that same challenge in the words of the scoffers here.

Jesus is being mocked as a king. He's served sour wine by cupbearers. He's placed with someone at his right hand and his left. He's given a royal superscription above his head.

[7 : 57] Once again, the prophetic words of scripture are lying in the background. In the mockery, we might hear the words of Psalm 22 being fulfilled again, this time from verses 7 to 8. All who see me mock me, they make mouths at me, they wag their heads.

He trusts in the Lord. Let him deliver him, let him rescue him, for he delights in him. The soldiers' mockery also fulfills Psalm 69 verse 21.

They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink. The soldiers refer to Jesus as the king of the Jews, as they are Gentiles, and would have thought in that category, rather than the category of Messiah.

The division between the two criminals, one to be raised up, and the other facing an even greater judgment, might invite comparisons between Jesus and Joseph, who is also associated with two criminals with different fates.

However, whereas Joseph asked the cupbearer to remember him when he was elevated, the criminal here asked Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom. A truly startling claim in the context, when you think about it.

[8 : 59] He is a man being crucified, dying on a cross, and the person next to him asking to be remembered when he comes into his kingdom. All of the appearances are against this condemned, seeming false Messiah entering into any kingdom whatsoever.

But Jesus is still saving at this point. The penitent criminal is also an example of the divisions emerging in the responses to the death of Jesus. There is darkness from the sixth to the ninth hour.

It's like the penultimate plague on Egypt, when darkness lay over the whole land. All that remains is the death of the firstborn. And these are also akin to the signs of Christ's coming in judgment.

They're signs of decreation. The curtain of the temple is torn in two. A division between God and his people is removed, and a way into God's presence is made open. Jesus alludes to the Psalms in a number of his sayings on the cross, recorded in the Gospels.

Verse 46 alludes to Psalm 31 verse 5. Into your hand I commit my spirit. You have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God. In the crucifixion accounts, the words of the Psalms are very prominent on Jesus' lips.

[10 : 09] Reading the words of the wider context of the Psalms that Jesus quotes is also illuminating. These are not the words of someone in the grip of despair. They're the words of someone confident in the Lord, even in the severest moment of distress.

These words anticipate resurrection. Our passage ends with the description of three different witnesses, the centurion, the assembled crowds, and his acquaintances with the women who had followed him from Galilee.

They're watching at a distance. And the reactions of the first two witnesses, the centurion and the assembled crowds, are described in parallel. Both are responding when they saw what had taken place.

The centurion declares the innocence of Christ. Herod, Pilate, and the centurion who carried out the sentence all concur in recognising Jesus' innocence. However, the centurion goes further.

He praises God. He recognises the hand of God in Jesus' death, something that was presumably apparent from the signs accompanying the death, and also the manner in which Christ died.

[11 : 13] The assembled crowds also react to what they have seen. They react in mourning, and perhaps even contrition for what has happened. They beat their breasts and returned. Already, perhaps, we have a sign of remorse, paving the way for Pentecost.

The death of Jesus, then, is immediately followed by signs of new life and promise. Jesus' acquaintances, and the women who had followed him from Galilee, are at a greater distance.

And perhaps we should hear Psalm 38 verse 11 in the background here. My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague, and my nearest kin stand far off. The role of the women as witnesses will also prove important in the rest of the narrative that follows.

A question to consider. Why is it that it is the words of the Psalms that are most prominent in the context of the crucifixion, especially on Jesus' lips?

What might we learn from this about the importance of the Psalms more generally?