Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The King Crucified: The Comedy at Calvary
Scripture: Luke 23:33-39
Code: 42-285

Open your Bible, if you will, to Luke 23. Luke chapter 23. I think I have a little explaining to do with regard to the title of the message. No doubt when you looked down at the bulletin today and you saw "The Comedy at Calvary," you were stunned by that. It is a shocking idea. It is an irreverent notion. In fact it is, on the surface, cruel and could well be considered blasphemous to think of Calvary as a comedy. And certainly, you have never thought of it as such. When you think of Calvary you think of its horrors, its cruelties, its agonies. You do not think of it as a comedy nor should you. I don't think of it as a comedy. But the people who participated in it when it happened turned it into a comedy. For them, Calvary was a joke. The classic dictionary definition of a comedy is, "A ludicrous or farcical event." That's Webster. If you wanted a synonym for that definition of comedy, it might be satire, farce, parody, burlesque, vaudeville, or you just might call it a joke – a rather extended joke.

And from the viewpoint of the crucifiers of Jesus, the whole event had been twisted into a perverted and extended joke. Truly it was, in their view, a comedy and Jesus was the butt of the joke. What was the joke? This is the King of the Jews. Laughable to them. Now remember, Jesus had already been stripped of his freedom when he was arrested, stripped of his rights when he was unjustly condemned, stripped of his friends when they all forsook him, stripped of his ministry. He had been stripped of his clothing, down to a loincloth, but that was not enough. They were about to strip him of his life, but in the process they wanted to make sure they stripped him of his honor and any respect that he might still possess. And so the execution of Jesus is designed to be one big laugh – comic satire. This is a King? Luke says very few words about the crucifixion, very few, but says many words about the attitude of the people who were there. Scorn, sneering, mockery, sarcasm, all at the laughable King of the Jews. Now obviously from God's viewpoint, what the crucifiers thought was so ironically ridiculous and funny was deadly serious. The Jews joined the comedic game with Jesus as the target of their sarcasm and ridicule, maybe to assuage their guilt. And the Roman soldiers, of course, joined the comedic game with Jesus as their target perhaps to assuage their boredom. But Luke describes for us the comedy at Calvary. How wrong can people be? How far from reality can they get?

Let's listen to what Luke writes starting in verse 33 of Luke 23, "When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." They cast lots dividing up his garments among themselves and the people stood by looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at him, saying, "He's saved others. Let him save himself if this is the Christ of God, His

Chosen One." And the soldiers also mocked him. They were coming up to him offering him sour wine and saying, "Since you are the King of the Jews, save yourself." Now there was also an inscription above him, "This is the King of the Jews." And one of the criminals who was hanged there was hurling abuse at him saying, "You are the Christ, aren't you? Save yourself and us." There are three verbal actions described here, sneering, mocking and hurling abuse. And they define for us the attitude of the crowd, both the Jews and the Romans, all of them throwing scorn at Jesus. There are three statements that reinforce the intent of those three actions, three snide, sarcastic, mocking, ironic statements. "He saved others, can't he save himself?" "Since you are the Son of God, save yourself and us." "You are the Christ, aren't you? Save yourself and us." All intended as sarcasm at this laughable claim that was placed above his head, "This is the King of the Jews."

It was actually more than just their taunts that makes this a comedy. They had staged this comedy very carefully. They had enthroned Jesus like a king is enthroned above the people, only on a cross. They had placed on his head a crown. Not a gold crown, but a crown of thorns digging into his brow, sending blood streaming down his face. And then is their diabolical comedy they had crucified one thief on the right and the one of the left. This is to parody a king who has on his right and his left his two leading courtiers, the second and the third-most honorable people in the court. And so they put two criminals, one on each side of this king, as if they were his most respected courtiers, and then they offer him mock royal wine as if doing their duty to serve the need of the monarch. It didn't just start there. He had been wearing the crown of thorns for awhile, and earlier when he was in Pilate's judgment hall, they had put a mock robe on him – a mock royal robe on him – and they had put a scepter in his hand, a reed, and they had hailed him as a king and then taken the reed and beat him in the head with it and spit on him to show their disdain for the notion that this was a king.

The whole joke really kind of started there and then it began to escalate and the Romans really turned it into a full-grown comedic melodrama, and it was all under the title, "This is the King of the Jews." What a laugh. The Jews laughed at it. The cross to them, Paul says, was a stumbling block. There was no way that their Messiah, that the son of God would ever be crucified. It was a joke to think of him as their king, their Messiah – a crucified man, crucified by their arch enemies, the pagan, idolatrous Romans? It was equally ludicrous for the Romans who saw a crucified God as "foolishness," Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1. Impossible to believe. He claimed to be a king, he had no army. He claimed to be a king, he had no entourage. He claimed to be a king, he had no territory. He claimed to be a king, he conquered no one ever. What a joke. What a joke. And so they extended the joke into a full parody and it was all just a big laugh. And they were so cruel in their comedy as to cast these sarcastic insults in the face of the crucified Christ. As we learned in the previous text, this was not a time for laughing. If you go back to verse 27, they're following Jesus on the way to the cross, the great multitude of the people, and among them women who were mourning and lamenting him. They were the official, dutiful hired mourners who went along at events like this. But Jesus, turning to them in verse 28 said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for me, but weep for yourselves and your children." This is not a time to laugh, this is, in fact, a time for weeping and not weeping for me,

but weeping for yourselves because you have rejected me and God has rejected you.

You'd better come to the cross with the right attitude. You don't want to laugh at your own eternal expense. Given the brutal character of crucifixion to start with, it should have been enough that Jesus was crucified without adding insult to injury and turning it into a joke and mocking him as he hung there in agony. Now let's go back to verse 33. "When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified him and the criminals; one on the right and the other on the left." Do I need to say to you that the New Testament is extremely restrained in how it describes the crucifixion of Jesus? Extremely restrained. Three Greek words there, "there they crucified him." Four words in English. That's all it says. There they crucified him. That's all it says. That's all it says in Matthew. That's all it says in Mark. That's all it says in Luke and that's all it says in John. There are no details at all. None. Not about the hammers, not about the nails, not about anything physical whatsoever. Just three words, "there they crucified him." Why is there not a further explanation of what this involved? Because to all the readers at the time the New Testament was written, they knew well what it was to be crucified.

Crucifixion was common. We're told that as many as 30,000 people were crucified in the land of Israel around the time of Christ. Thirty thousand. The Romans always crucified them in public places along highways and on hills so that everybody would see the results of rebellion against Rome. They were well aware of what a crucifixion involved. No need to describe it and there's no need for the Bible writer to describe Jesus and the actual crucifixion that he endured because it would have been exactly the same as everybody else endured. I probably need to remind you, although it's very obvious, that it says, "There they crucified him and the criminals." Whatever they did to him they did to them. So the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is not a solitary experience for him, not by any means. There were tens of thousands of people who were crucified in the ancient world until it was finally outlawed in the 3rd or 4th Century A.D. Tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, were crucified and in one way or another that it was the same for all of them. So the Bible is not concerned to give us details about the actual physical elements of it, for that's not the point and that was very familiar to everyone.

Crucifixion goes back, actually, to 500 B.C., the 6th Century. It seems to have been invented by the Persians. Darius crucifies 3,000 Babylonians. That's the first time we read about it. Alexander the Great, in the great Greek Empire, crucified 2,000 citizens of the City of Tyre in vengeance over the way they treated him, and put them up on crosses along the shore for everyone to see. Around 100 B.C., Alexander Jannaeus crucified 800 Pharisees and made their wives and children watch them be crucified. The Romans came to power in 63 B.C. and used crucifixion extensively and perfected it as a fine art of torture. In 70 A.D. when the Romans did conquer Israel and destroyed the temple and slaughtered the Jews historians say that Titus used so many crosses to crucify Jews they ran out of lumber. Crucifixion was very common. It didn't need an explanation. But the Jews couldn't comprehend that their Messiah would be crucified. He was to come as a conqueror, not one

conquered. And especially that he would be crucified by being rejected by the leaders of Israel and then executed by Pagan idolatrous Romans. This is not their Messiah, this is an agent from Satan who does what he does through the power of Satan and he died a common death like tens of thousands of other low-life, riff-raff, common criminals because crucifixion was reserved only for them.

This was so impossible an idea, that Jesus was truly the King of the Jews, that for them it was an absolute joke. The joke lingered, by the way, after Calvary. On my several visits to the City of Rome, I'm always fascinated when I'm able to do it, to go over to the Palatine Hill near Circus Maximus, and to go into what was once a guardhouse for Roman soldiers. And in the guardhouse there is some ancient graffiti that goes back to the early centuries. The graffiti picture is literally scraped into the stone, a crucified body of a man with the head of a jackass. And below the crucified man with the head of a jackass is a Christian bowing down and the graffiti says, "Alexamenos worships his God." What a joke. What a joke. A crucified God. Nothing more than worshipping a jackass. Justin Martyr, a Christian apologist, in his first apology A.D. 152, summarized the view of Christ that was held by people in the world and essentially they thought it was a joke. They say, writes Justin, "Our madness consists in this, that we give to a crucified man a place equal to the unchangeable and eternal creator God." So if you think a crucified man is the eternal creator God, you are a fool and that is a joke. It was shear insanity to the murderers of Jesus to consider him any different than others who were crucified. In fact, for the Jews his crucifixion sealed the fact that he was not the Messiah, because Deuteronomy 21:23 says, "Cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree; cursed by God."

Anyone, therefore, who was crucified, was treated with contempt, treated with disdain. It was reserved for the worst and the lowest, the social pariahs, the outcasts. And so when they came to the cross, typically they came to the cross with scorn, and the idea that Jesus claimed to be God's anointed king and Messiah, was just laughable – so laughable, so bizarre, so ludicrous and so ridiculous that they managed to turn the whole thing into a comic melodrama. For them a man like Jesus, claiming to be a king, only demonstrated that he belonged in an asylum for the insane. However, he was King and one person recognized it. Go down to verse 42. "One of the two thieves who was put in a position to be part of the comedy said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom." He could see through the joke. He could see through the farce, the parody, the vaudeville, to the truth. For the moment, Jesus looks to be a prince of fools. How wrong an assessment that is. Back to verse 33. "When they came to the place called The Skull" – we don't know where that place is. There is a traditional site. There is a more contemporary site. There's discussion about whether it's one or the other or perhaps another site. We don't know. Nothing in the New Testament says it was a hill, nothing, but it was traditionally the Roman way to crucify people in an elevated place so that people could see them.

They wanted to make their point, so traditionally it has been considered that it was some kind of a high ground and it was called The Skull perhaps because it had some kind of configuration that

represented or resembled a skull. That's all we know. We do know it was called The Skull, *Golgotha* in Aramaic or Hebrew, C*alvaria* in Latin or *Calvary*. Some have said it was called The Skull because of the Skulls of the people who were crucified were lying around. I don't think so. I don't think the Jews would have a place where skulls were lying all over the place. But it's interesting that its name is associated with the gruesome reality of what went on there – death. "And there they crucified him." That's the same phrase in all four gospels. Very restrained. "They" means the Roman soldiers. You can see that in Mark 15 versus 16 to 24. It was the Roman soldiers who actually crucified Jesus. Before they crucified him, according to Matthew 27:34, they gave him wine to drink mingled with gall. What was this? Well, as cruel as they were there was a little bit of human sensibility in them so that they gave to the person who was to be crucified a mild sedative; perhaps not coming close to easing the agonies of crucifixion, but sedating them enough so they could get them nailed to the cross without a fight. They didn't need to sedate Jesus and so after tasting it, he was unwilling to drink.

He would take it all with full senses. He didn't need to be sedated to get him nailed there. He would put his hands there and his feet there willingly. That's all we know. They crucified him and he refused the sedative, but he wasn't crucified alone. Two criminals, some think co-conspirators with Barabbas because Barabbas, though he was a murderer, was also an insurrectionist and you don't lead an insurrection by yourself. And Barabbas had been released because it was the custom to release a prisoner at the Passover and they wanted Barabbas and not Jesus. Perhaps these were two co-conspirators with Barabbas who were guilty of some elements of insurrection. They are referred to in the scripture a couple of ways; criminals and they are also called robbers, so we can't be sure. But all three of them are crucified in the same way. Back now to Luke 23, "There they crucified him and the criminals." I think sometimes we want to isolate Jesus out of that scene but we can't do that. Whatever Jesus experienced they experienced, too. All three of them got the exact same treatment. All three are crucified in the exact same way, as thousands of others before them and after them would be. And I know when you read, "There they crucified him," you wish you knew more and you have a right to know more. They understood when they read this in its original because they were experiencing the reality of crucifixion right on into the 4th Century A.D.

So maybe a little bit of a summary just so you understand what was going on, but what I want you to keep in mind is this was being done to three people, not one, and it had been done to thousands and thousands of others before and would be after. Through the years there has been a lot of study of this. There have been a lot of interested people who have looked at the crucifixion of Christ from the historical, biblical and even pathological viewpoint, bringing to bear upon it everything e can out of history of other crucifixions and forms of torture and even in the more modern world looking at it from a medical viewpoint. Perhaps the most concise and helpful treatment appeared March 21, 1986 in *JAMA, The Journal of the American Medical Association*, which is a prestigious journal, as you know. And this particular study of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was done by the Department of Pathology at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, a very fine institution. They took the precise statements of the four gospels, the accurate historical sources and their pathological and medical knowledge and

they put together a very helpful article which you may want to find for yourself. *JAMA,* March 21, 1986.

All their study included the fact that everyone who was crucified was beaten before crucifixion. This was always done. Braided leather thongs with bits of metal and sheep bone or some other kind of animal bone embedded in them were used to lash the victim from the bottom of the neck all the way down to the back of the knees. At the time that he was being lashed, his arms were extended up and tied to a pole. He was in a slumped position. Two *lictors* hit him with alternating blows. We don't know whether or not they followed the Jewish prescription of no more than 40 lashes. We don't know how many lashes these people received. There is no indication. But all the results would be that the bone and the metal ripped into the flesh, deep contusions, lacerations into subcutaneous tissues, into the fabric of the muscles. Pain, blood loss, circulatory shock would ensue. All three received this. Maybe Jesus had some exacerbated agonies because it is said of Jesus that when they took him back into the judgment hall after this, they put a robe on him. It would be a crusty, old robe made of wool that would do nothing be agitate and irritate his open wounds. And then they jammed a crown of thorns on his head, hit him in the head with a stick and spit on him and at some point they ripped the robe back off him, which would again agitate and rip the wounds. There would be intense pain, blood loss, hematidrosis making the skin hypersensitive. Add to that lack of sleep, lack of food, lack of water, and after all of that then came crucifixion for all three of them.

The Romans didn't invent it, but boy did they perfect it. It was a low death with maximum agony. The victims carried the cross, perhaps a cross apiece, across the back of their neck and their shoulders, and their arms were tied to it. Jesus received help because apparently he wasn't moving fast enough or some other motivation. So Simon of Cyrene was asked to carry his cross and either he took the piece off the shoulders of Jesus and carried it for him, or Jesus was actually carrying his whole cross and Simon picked up the bottom of it that was banging along the cobblestones because Luke says he carried it behind him. Arriving at the place of crucifixion they would be offered that sedation which Jesus refused, then they would be thrown to the ground on their backs. The cross piece would then be pulled under their shoulders and their arms were nailed to the cross piece. The Romans used nails. Archeologists have found the remains of crucified victims from as early as the 1st Century and earlier, and the nails were tapered iron spikes five to seven inches long, about a half inch in diameter square. They were driven through the wrists, right here rather than the palms of the hands, so they could carry the full weight of the slumping body. And so lying on his back on the ground, each of these three would be nailed to the cross piece with these great, square spikes driven through each wrist.

The impaled victim was then lifted up and the cross piece was attached to the horizontal, often called the stipes. The feet were then nailed, the knees bent up. The feet were nailed with one nail, one foot upon the other so that the victim could push up to breathe, to inhale and exhale and pull up on the wounds to do the same. And whether pulling with the wrists or pushing with the feet, they would be

pulling and pushing against the wound. By the way, the slumping condition and the bent knees was so severe that you couldn't breathe in that position. The soldiers could bring death in minutes by breaking the legs. If they broke the legs and the victim couldn't push up, he would die in minutes because he couldn't breathe. To survive, the victim would push up and pull up on the wounds. Insects would burrow into the wounds, into the eyes, the ears, the nose. Birds of prey would tear at the open sites. By the way, no one survived crucifixion.

To confirm death in hours or days when the Romans thought the person might be dead, the body was pierced with a lance and it was pierced in precisely the exact spot in the heart in which the flow of blood and water, as it's described in the Bible, would come out to indicate death. And by the way, all Roman soldiers were taught the most precise place in a human anatomy to put your lance. If they were soldiers, they were killers. Each effort of the person on the cross to breathe would mean he had to pull himself up or push himself up, which would then rub the open wounds up the course of the rugged cross and then back again ripping and shredding those wounds further. The nails in the wrists would crush or sever the large sensory right motor median nerve, and when a nerve is damaged and the nerve is pierced, the bolts of pain are relentless. The nails in the feet would likely pierce the deep peroneal nerve – the planter nerve – with the same result. So you have viscous, relentless nerve pain through your feel and through your hands. The weight of the body pulling against all these agonizing, torturous bolts of pain, struggles pulling itself up, pushing itself up, breathing is shallow. You don't get enough oxygen, what do you get? Tetanic contractions, muscle cramps. Add to that dehydration, arrhythmias, congestive heart failure, plural effusions. One can't even comprehend how painful all of it is. There's a word for it: excruciating. Excruciating. That's the most extreme word we know in English to describe pain and it comes the Latin *excruci* – "out of the cross." Out of the cross. This is the experience of all three men, all three, but for one of those three it was his destiny. But not just his destiny, ours as well.

Now the Jews should have known, but instead of this proving that Jesus is not their Messiah, it did just the opposite. It proved that he was the Messiah. Look at Psalm 22. Let's go a thousand years before, Psalm 22, a thousand years earlier to the time of David. Nobody has seen crucifixion. It doesn't exist until 500 years before Christ. This is a thousand years. Verse 12, Psalm 22, "Many bulls have surrounded me, strong bulls of Bashan have encircled me." What is this? What is this? Bashan was originally Amorite land – Amorite land east of the Jordan and south of Mount Hermon – way up in the north of Israel; a beautiful, lush land. The snow on Mount Hermon sent down plenty of water into the north. These were well-watered pasture lands. Consequently, they were lands were cattle was raised. Great, strong bulls grew in the land of Bashan. Amos 4:1 says it was the land of cows, where if you have bulls you have cows and so this was a flourishing, fertile area. Once the territory of the Amorites, but given by God to Israel. It represents the powerful and the strong and so it is a symbol of the Jews, the powerful, the flourishing, the well-fed, the well-watered Jews. They surround me, they encircle me. They open wide their mouth at me as a ravening and a roaring lion. This is hatred, animosity, hostility, which is precisely what those well-fed and flourishing leaders of Israel were doing

to Jesus as they surrounded him at the cross.

Then he begins to describe something of what crucifixion is, even though no one had ever seen such. “I am poured out like water. All my bones are out of joint. My heart is like wax melted within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd. My tongue cleaves to my jaws. Thou dost lay me in the dust of death for dogs and other symbols have surrounded me, abandoned evildoers encompass me. They pierced my hands and my feet.” Wow. “I can count all my bones. They look. They stare at me. They divided my garments among them and for my clothing they cast lots.” No surprises, folks. What was going on there, hat was going on there was God bringing to pass the fulfillment of a prophecy from a thousand years before. Three hundred years later, in 700, along came a prophet by the name of Isaiah and in Isaiah 53, that great chapter in his prophecy, Isaiah describes this crucifixion before anyone had ever seen a crucifixion. Isaiah says this, Isaiah 53 verse 5, “He was pierced through for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. This chastening for our wellbeing fell on him and by his scourgings we are healed.” In the next verse he says, “God has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on him. He is pierced for our transgressions.” A Psalmist a thousand years before says he will be pierced. His hands and his feet will be pierced. Seven hundred years before, the prophet Isaiah says that he will be pierced not for his own transgressions, but for our transgressions. There you have, folks, what sets Jesus apart from the other two. They were pierced for their own transgressions, he was pierced for ours.

It is not the physical sufferings of Jesus that are unique, it is the thing they accomplish that is unique. A hundred and fifty years later, still long before the Jews have been exposed to crucifixion, along comes another prophet by the name of Zechariah. And Zechariah, looking into the future says, “Someday I will pour out on the House of David,” chapter twelve, verse 10,“and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and supplication, so that they will look on me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him.” While once they laughed when they pierced him, in the future they will mourn when they look back on what they did. David predicted the piercing of Jesus. Isaiah predicted the piercing of Jesus. Five hundred and fifty years before the cross, Zechariah predicts the piercing of Jesus and a time when the Jews will look back and realize what they did. How could they have known this? How could they have known the Messiah would be pierced? Crucifixion didn’t exist. This becomes the mark of his Messiahship. Listen to Revelations 1:7, “Behold he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over him.” Who is even those who pierced him? The Jews. Someday they’re going to look on the one they pierced – so they pierced him and they pierced the thief on the left hand and they pierced the thief on the right hand. The thieves were pierced for their own transgressions. He was pierced through for our transgressions. It was not the physical elements of his crucifixion that were unique. They were not unique. It was the purpose and the achievement of his crucifixion that is unique. Yes he was cursed, but he was made a curse for us. Yes he was pierced, but he was pierced for our transgressions. It was foolishness to the Greeks. It was a stumbling block to the Jews and they turned it into a joke, a

farce, and a mockery.

Someday, in the future, the Jews will view it differently. They will not laugh. They will weep. Once Jesus was dead and the Jews had managed to lie about and bribe the Roman soldiers to lie about the resurrection, they had to justify what they had done. They had to keep up the joke that this Jesus was the King. They had to keep it up. So even after he's gone, even after he's died and they've denied his resurrection, he ascended into heaven, they've got to keep up the comedy. Guess what, 70 A.D. the comedy ended and it ended seriously and deadly. You may not laugh at the cross and you may not see it as comedy. Perhaps most people don't, but I'll assure you of this. Most people don't take it seriously enough. How serious is the cross? There is no salvation, no forgiveness, no heaven unless you embrace Jesus as your Lord and Savior and believe in the sacrifice that he offered at the cross to pay the penalty for your sins. You either take the cross seriously or you become an eternal tragedy. Well, next time we'll look a little more closely at the comedy. As I said, most people probably don't laugh at the cross. That was the ultimate blasphemy and it's amazing when you look at that account and you realize that Luke says virtually nothing about the actual crucifixion of Jesus; just there, they crucified him. But all his words have to do with the attitude of the people because he's painting for us this final apostasy of Israel, the horror of such blasphemy to turn the son of God into a joke. This also speaks to the issue of the grace of God because it was from that cross, in the middle of the comedy, that Jesus said, "Father" – what – "forgive them." Was there ever a greater illustration of grace? I trust that your view of the cross is the right one, the savings one.

Father, now send us on our way. Bring some into the prayer room, Lord, that you would desire to come. Lift up your son. It's in his name we pray. Amen.

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