

The King Crucified: Responses at Calvary

Scripture: Luke 23:47-49

Code: 42-289

Let's open the Bible now to the great, great gospel of Luke, which has become such a treasure to us. Luke chapter 23. Luke chapter 23. In our last message from Luke 23, we looked at verses 44 through 46, the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. And now we come to verse 47. Verse 47 to 49. Responses at Calvary. Responses at Calvary. Luke gives us a very brief account of responses to the death of Christ: the response of Roman soldiers, the response of the crowd, and the response of the followers of Jesus. And it's an appropriate way to close his record on the death of Christ because each of these responses is a right response. The Roman soldiers responded as they should have, and the crowd responded as it should have, and the followers of Christ responded as they should have. Each response, the right is unique. Together, they give us the picture of the full response that should be required of all of us. Certainly fitting on a Sunday when we come to the Lord's table to consider responses to the cross of Christ.

But when the Lord introduced this ordinance to us, it was not merely to recall the history of the event, but to renew the right responses. This table that takes us back to the cross is designed to elicit from us a renewed confession of sin, a renewed commitment to obedience. It is designed to elicit from us gratitude and joy. It is designed to be a testimony. In a sense, it is a full expression of worship, gathering up all those components. As we think about the responses that happened that day at Calvary, we need to look at our own hearts and ask what our response to the cross is.

Let me read verses 47 to 49: "Now when the centurion saw what had happened, he began praising God, saying, 'Certainly, this man was righteous.' And, all the multitudes who came together for the spectacle, when they observed what had happened began to return, beating their breasts. And all his acquaintances, and the women who accompanied Him from Galilee were standing at a distance seeing these things." Luke doesn't waste any time. As soon as Jesus breathes His last, verse 46. As soon as He dies, there are immediate responses. We have been through the most solemn moment in history, the death of Christ. We have come to understand that He took the full wrath of God against the sins of all who would ever believe. God showed up on Calvary, particularly from 12:00 to 3:00 in the darkness, and in the earthquake, and in the resurrection of dead saints from their graves, and in the splitting of the veil in the Holy of Holies from top to bottom. God showed up in a preview of His full day of the Lord judgment presence. Only this time, He didn't pour out His judgment on sinners; He poured out His judgment on His Son in the place of sinners.

It signaled the ratification of the New Covenant, and that's why at that very moment the veil was split in the temple because the way to God was fully opened. It was the end of the temple, it was the end of the priesthood, it was the end of the sacrifices, it was the end of the old dispensation. At the moment that Jesus died, all of that was gone. We considered those things, and now it's time to look at these three responses, and ask ourselves the question: what is my response to this monumental, unequalled event?

First of all, the convinced. The convinced, verse 47. "Now when the centurion saw what had happened, he began praising God saying, 'Certainly this man was righteous.'" Matthew tells about him. Mark tells about him as well. His testimony is very, very unlikely. You need to know a little bit about a centurion. A Roman centurion was the commander of a hundred men, a hundred men were called a century. Hence, their commander is a centurion. Centuries were the building blocks of a Roman legion. There were, in the entire Roman army, about 25 legions. Each legion was comprised of about six thousand men divided into ten cohorts of six hundred men each. Each cohort had three maniples, and each maniple was divided into two centuries. So, basically, a century was the smallest unit in the roman system. Each century was commanded by a centurion. They were soldiers. They were not elite. They were on the ground with the troops, had proven themselves, and earned their way to that position because of their effective soldiering. They had put their life on the line successfully and they were leaders in the hardest and most threatening of times.

This particular officer was guarding Jesus and obviously in charge of the soldiers who were responsible for this prisoner. He was over the soldiers, most likely, who arrested Jesus on Thursday night in the garden, who then stayed with Him to make sure that He didn't escape and that no one took Him away. These would be the soldiers under his command, along with him, who were there with Jesus through the whole time of the trials, and particularly when He was brought before Pilate. Pilate's Praetorium. This centurion and his soldiers would be the ones who mocked Jesus. They would be the ones who threw an old soldier's cloak on Him as if it were a royal robe, and put a reed in His hand as if it were a scepter, and a crown on His head as if it were a crown belonging to a king, when in fact it was a crown of thorns. They were the ones who would have taken that mock scepter and hit Him in the face with it, spit on Him, and mocked Him, and made a joke out of Him. They were the soldiers who were eyewitnesses of the entire ordeal from the very beginning. They heard all the conversations. They heard all the accusations. They heard everything that the leaders of Israel sent against Him, and they heard the verdict of innocent repeated at least six times. They saw Jesus act like no prisoner they had ever seen. Completely innocent. His innocence verified time after time, after time, after time, and yet He never retaliates, He never cries out, He never demands some kind of justice that He's not getting. He suffers with grace and majesty through the unjust trials, and He takes all their mockery and abuse silently, never protesting. Even though they spit on Him, and taunt Him, and mistreat Him, he never curses them he never threatens them.

They had to be utterly amazed at how differently He reacted to what was going on than every other prisoner they had ever experienced. There was no category for someone to behave like this, an innocent man taken all the way to the cross, and then they were the ones who nailed Him to that cross, at least four of them. But until now, the uniqueness of Jesus doesn't seem to have any particular impact on them. They were hardened men. And Jesus being passive, didn't seem to make a difference in the way they treated Him. They didn't treat His passivity with a little more sympathy, no not at all. They showed Him no mercy. They hammered those nails through His hands as they would through the hands of anybody and through His feet, they set the cross upright, dropped it into the hole dug for it while it ripped and tore the open wounds. They cast lots for Jesus' garments and they just sat down to watch Him die like they had watched hundreds of others die. But all the while, the things they were experiencing were ruminating in their minds. They heard Jesus pray for His killers, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." They saw the noble way He suffered. They heard Him cry out to His Father. They heard Him promise paradise to a repentant thief who had been cursing Him.

And then, they experienced the impossible: midnight at noon, three hours of pitch blackness, and an earthquake that split rocks. They could no longer ignore reality. And the final proof; the darkness, the earthquake, and then Jesus, just before He died, cries with a loud voice, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit." That had never been done. People who died of crucifixion had oxygen deprivation to their brains and were long incoherent before they actually died. They couldn't muster up enough breath to breathe, let alone to shout at the top of their voice. This man took death by His own will and made it His servant.

Mark writes, "When the centurion who stood opposite Him saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, 'Truly this man was the Son of God.'" Where did he pick that phrase up? John 19:7 says, "The Jews accused Him this way. They said, 'He made Himself the Son of God,'" and the centurion concluded that He was. Matthew notes that the earthquake coming at the exact moment along with the cry of Jesus pushed them over the edge into belief when they, not just the centurion, but the soldiers with him, saw the earthquake, and the things that had happened, they feared greatly. That little expression, "feared greatly," it's exactly the same words as were used on the Mount of Transfiguration when Peter, James and John feared greatly the transfigured Christ when they saw Him in His glory.

This is the kind of fear that is a typical reaction of people who realized the truth of who Jesus is. It dawned on them that they had crucified the Son of God. Luke tells us the centurion said, "Certainly this man was righteous." Righteous. It was not just a statement about innocence. It was a statement about positive righteousness that caused him, along with the other soldiers, to begin praising God, had come to an awareness of the true God, the true Son of God as the righteous one. These are the first converts to Christ, moments after His crucifixion. Coming to faith at precisely the very time He dies.

There are a lot of other details I'd like to know about what they were thinking, but we'll have to wait to get to heaven to find out those details. Did they know that the Old Testament promised that the Messiah would be called "the righteous One?" Psalm 16:10 says He would be the righteous One. Isaiah 53:11 says He would be the righteous One. Jeremiah 23:5 says He would be the righteous One. This is more than the seventh affirmation of Jesus' innocence. It's the word *dikaaios*, which is righteous. From the human view, the whole thing was a stupendous crime against justice and they were guilty of it, as if it was not God's will, but from the divine side. It was a stupendous act of justice and it was God's will. It struck them. They had in fact killed not just an innocent man, but a righteous man. Innocent is to say that He didn't do what He was accused of doing. Righteous is to say He only does what is right. In fact, they had killed the Son of God.

It wasn't just the centurion, but those who were with him who came to this faith. We can ask them the details when we get to heaven, but they had absorbed the whole thing. The claims of Jesus they'd heard, the accusations against Him they'd heard, and they drew the right conclusion. Aided, of course, and enabled by the blessed Holy Spirit who gathered into the Kingdom there not just a thief, but some Roman soldiers, hardened, Roman, idolatrous, pagan soldiers. The evidence was convincing and they were the convinced.

The next verse introduces us to the convicted. "And all the multitudes who came together for the spectacle, when they observed what had happened, began to return beating their breasts." Here again we meet the fickle crowd. Boy, what a week. Talk about running the gamut of emotions. Wow. Go back to Monday when Jesus came into the city and they threw palm branches before Him, and hailed Him as the Son of David and the Messiah, "Hosanna, to the Son of David." They hailed Him as their King, their Messiah. This was the hope of their heart. This was joy. This was joy over the top. This was exhilarating, exuberant happiness. They were thrilled. This was their moment. There was going through that crowd a racing joyous anticipation that finally their Messiah had come. An extreme emotion that made their hearts pound as they thought about the reality that after all the centuries, Messiah had finally come. This was extreme joy.

A few days later, on Friday morning, their emotion was very different. Not extreme joy, but extreme. Extreme anger, hatred, animosity as they screamed, "Crucify Him, Crucify Him. We will not have this man to reign over us. His blood be on us and on our children." The extreme emotion again carrying them away. And here, as they run that emotional gamut, is the last extreme outburst. And what is it? Fear, beating their breasts, fear. They are terrified. It says in verse 48, "All the crowds who came together for this, the crowd that started to gather in the morning and has been gathering all the way along through the day, and now surrounding the cross, the vacillating mob who have watched the *theria*," the spectacle, only time in the Bible that word is ever used, this is a one-of-a-kind event, a spectacular unequalled occurrence at Calvary, the divine spectacle at Calvary. And what is their response? They are terrified.

Why? Well they started out as a comedy, didn't it? Started out with them orchestrating a joke on Jesus, hurling abuse at Him and sarcasm, making a mockery out of Him. But then God came, and God's presence was known to them in the darkness and the earthquake, and the comedy became a tragedy. And nobody spoke for three hours, at least it's not recorded that they said anything and Jesus didn't speak for those three hours. But God poured out His wrath and His fury, and they were terrified by the darkness, by the earthquake that split the rocks. That's what it says. "And all the multitudes came together for the spectacle, when they observed what had happened, the darkness, the earthquake, God arrived, they began to return back to the city." It's 3:00 now. Time for the sacrifice of the Passover lambs between 3:00 and 5:00. They need to go to the temple. And if they hadn't already heard, by the time they get to the temple, they're going to find absolute chaos. There would be tens of thousands of animals ready to be sacrificed by the full contingency of the priests who are in horror because the curtain has been torn from the top to the bottom that separates the Holy of Holies, the presence of God, which is so fearful that only one person could go in once a year, the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. And only after he had made sacrifice for his own sins could he go in and come back out in a big hurry. And now it's thrown wide open. The chaos at the temple would have been indescribable. They wouldn't know what to do.

As these people go back down from the place of the execution of Jesus and the two thieves, to go back to celebrate their Passover, they don't go with any joy. The comedy is over. The tragedy has taken over completely, and they're described doing one thing, beating their breasts, pounding their chests. Believe me, the event has lost its charm. They have experienced a mortal wound to their souls that will not heal. There is pain without relief from guilt without comfort. They know God showed up. Freshly spoken words of blasphemy which came so easily to their lips are now the cause of their own anxiety, and their own, guilt and their own fear. And so they pound their chests.

This is reminiscent of the Publican, isn't it? In Luke 18:13, who in fear and guilt wouldn't lift his eyes, so much as to look to heaven, but bowed his head, pounding his chest saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." It is a way in which the Jews expressed the guilt and the fear of having violated God. It was really the miraculous that scared them into this terror. And that too, beloved, is a right response. Fear of God is a right response, it is a commanded response. Terror over one's guilt and rejection of Jesus Christ is a right response. Fear of divine judgment because of how you treat Christ is exactly the way a sinner should feel. And this had some benefit. I'm convinced that this guilt, while it doesn't seem to be resolved here in the text, is preparation for something that came later.

As they walk down that hill feeling that guilt, that guilt would increase, day after day after day, as they couldn't erase from their minds the memory of that event. And when Peter got up on the Day of Pentecost, and preached a sermon, the sermon ended like this: "Let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." This exacerbates the guilt they already feel, the fear of divine judgment over what they had done. And

when they heard this, verse 37, “They were pierced to the heart.” The heart’s already being made tender by the experience at the cross. I believe that for those folks, that guilt and fear they felt as they came down from Calvary was preparation for Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost. And they said to Peter and the rest of the Apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do? How can we possibly be saved from the wrath of God over our crimes against Christ?” That’s what they’re asking. And Peter said, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sin and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Be saved. “And those who received his word were baptized,” and there were added that day about three thousand souls. The initial preparation for that repentance on Pentecost was the pounding of the chest in horror and terror and fear of what they had done to Jesus. If you read chapter 3 of the book of Acts, you will find that the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the message of Jesus Christ whom they crucified is indeed both Lord and Christ continued to ring from the Apostles’ lips throughout Jerusalem. The Apostles were halted by the leaders of Israel. They were arrested by the leaders of Israel. But that, in actuality, didn’t stop anything because the work had already begun in the hearts of many, many of those people who were there. And in spite of the Apostles being silenced by the leaders, Acts 4:4 says, “Many of those who had heard the message believed and the number of men came to be about five thousand.” Three thousand men, we can assume plus women, five thousand men plus women. Thousands of people are coming to Christ in the weeks following the death of Christ, preparation for that beginning that day on the hill when they were filled with the fear of God.

That’s a right response. That’s a right response. It must lead to repentance, fear, guilt, anxiety, dread. It must lead to repentance and faith in Christ. And when it does, salvation comes. It was a right response by the convinced Romans to embrace Jesus as the Son of God. It was a right response of the people to feel fear. And for many thousands of them, to then repent and embrace Christ as Lord at a later time.

That leaves us with only one other group. Verse 49, “And all His acquaintances and the women who accompanied Him from Galilee were standing at a distance seeing these things.” All his acquaintances and the women, this is the little entourage that made up the followers of Jesus. Women from Galilee. Susanna, you remember, from chapter 8, was one. There was Mary Magdalene. There was Mary, the mother of our Lord. There were others among the women who followed the Lord. John gives their names in John chapter 19 verses 25 to 27. He identifies who they are. Let me just read that to you. It says: “There was, standing by the cross, His mother, His mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.” And there were others, as I mentioned, indicated in the eighth chapter of Luke who were followers of Christ.

There was also the disciple whom He loved, John. And John tells us in that passage I just read you that they were standing near the cross, and they were at the beginning of the crucifixion, and that at

the very beginning, you remember, Jesus said, “Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother.” And He gave His mother to the care of John. But now, they’re no longer standing near the cross. Verse 49 says, “They’re standing at a distance.” As the comedy unfolded, as the mockery and the abuse unfolded, it’s very reasonable to assume that they couldn’t stand what was going on for the One that they loved so profoundly and they faded to the fringe. And then, through all the darkness and the horror of the judgment that fell, they might have thought that when the presence of God came down, He would have struck dead the Romans and He would have struck dead the Jews. But instead, Christ feels His wrath. And so they’re there at a distance.

And it might seem like we really don’t know what they were thinking because all it says is, “Seeing these things. Seeing these things.” Well, I think that says it all, folks. Watching, without comment. Why? They didn’t know what to say. Shock, they’re stunned. How can it be? They can’t comprehend it. This is the Messiah, they know that. This is the Son of God, they know that. They’re devastated by what has happened to Him. They cannot process it. They cannot comprehend it. It makes no sense. This is the same attitude that shows up on the road to Emmaus, and the disciples who can’t comprehend what has gone on. As far as they’re concerned, they just don’t get it. It’s as if it’s all over. They’re stunned. Silence, shock. And that, too, is the right response if the cross is the end. If the cross is all there is, then we are left with shock. They didn’t speak because they didn’t know what to say. Stunned silence is all they could bring.

Until chapter 24. Sunday morning, when the women, and the followers of Jesus find out He is alive. And folks, it’s a proper response to be stunned by the cross, it’s a proper response to be shocked by the cross, but the resurrection transforms all of that into great joy. I couldn’t even comprehend their sadness that day. It would be impossible to even describe the sorrow that they must have felt as they stared at what they had seen. But their sorrow turned to joy when He came out of the grave. These three looks given us by Luke remind us that the reason Jesus died was to bring sinners to the confidence that He is the Son of God, to bring sinners to repent of their sins, and to bring sinners to embrace His death and His resurrection. Therein is salvation.

What’s your response? Are you convinced? Are you convicted? And has your confusion and your being confounded dissipated and disappeared in the glory of the resurrection? I trust so.

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