

Sacrificed

Jesus' death provides salvation to all who trust in Him.

Human history contains many examples of individuals who gave their lives to save others. Loving parents have sacrificed their lives to save their children from accident or injury. Brave soldiers have run into harm's way to save their comrades. Police, firefighters, and other first responders have rushed into peril in order to save the lives of strangers. So the question is worth asking, Was the death of Jesus on the cross really unique?

The short answer to that question is yes; a longer answer is that Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross is the very heart of the gospel. The mission of Jesus included many aspects. He came to reveal the Father as no one else had done or could do. He came to teach and transform the Abrahamic covenant in light of His mission to establish the new covenant. He came to bring divine deliverance by healing diseases, casting out demons, and raising the dead. Still, the most crucial thing Jesus accomplished is tied directly to His sacrificial death on the cross.

Only Jesus' death on the cross qualified as an effective substitutionary atonement for human sin. While sacrificial acts by other people might preserve someone's physical life, only Jesus' death can save us from eternal, spiritual death. Only Jesus could substitute for the sins of others, because Jesus alone was (and is) the sinless Son of God. Only Jesus could accomplish salvation, because He alone was the Father's provision to do so. In light of these truths, this session focuses on the passage in Luke's Gospel that narrates Jesus' crucifixion for our sins. May we approach this study with the reverence and humility the Scripture—and the event itself—deserves!

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

LUKE 23:1-49

In Luke 23:1-5, the Gospel writer described how the Jewish religious leaders brought Jesus before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Cleverly, and with

evil intent, the Jewish leaders announced to Pilate that Jesus was guilty of fomenting insurrection. They accused Jesus of opposing Rome, encouraging Jews not to pay taxes to Caesar, and claiming to be the Messiah—in other words, a king. After questioning Jesus for himself, Pilate declared that he found no reason to charge Jesus. However, the Jewish leaders kept insisting that Jesus was stirring up the people throughout all Galilee and Judea.

In 23:6-12, Luke reported Pilate's attempt to appease the Jewish leaders by sending Jesus (and His accusers) to be judged by Herod Antipas, who happened to be in Jerusalem at the time. Herod welcomed the opportunity to meet and question the prisoner, but when Jesus would neither answer his questions nor work a miracle for him, Herod turned Jesus over to his soldiers. The soldiers mocked Jesus, put a robe on Him in contempt, and returned Him to Pilate.

Luke reported in 23:13-25 that Pilate made several attempts to release Jesus, knowing that His accusers had presented no evidence for their serious charges. He brought out a prisoner named Barabbas—who was actually guilty of fomenting rebellion—in hopes that the crowd would choose to condemn Barabbas and release Jesus. The crowd would not be dissuaded, however. They kept clamoring for Jesus' execution. Pilate finally gave in to the crowd's demands. He released Barabbas and handed over Jesus to be crucified.

Verses 26-31 reveal that Jesus was now so physically battered that the authorities ordered a bystander named Simon to carry the cross for Jesus to the place of execution. Meanwhile, a group of women followed the solemn procession. Jesus turned and told the women not to weep for Him but for Jerusalem, because the city was destined for destruction following His death.

In 23:32-43, Luke described the dramatic scene of Jesus hanging on the cross. Two criminals were crucified alongside Him, one on each side. Jesus asked the Father to forgive His executioners even as the Jewish leaders and soldiers mocked Jesus for His apparent inability to save Himself. Even one of the criminals hanging beside Him yelled insults at Jesus. The other criminal, however, rebuked the first one and pleaded with Jesus to remember him when Jesus came into His kingdom. Jesus promised that the repentant criminal would be with Him in paradise that day.

In 23:44-49, Luke noted the timing and extraordinary circumstances of Jesus' death on the cross. An unusual darkness fell over the scene from noon until three in the afternoon. At that time the temple curtain separating the most holy place was ripped down the middle, and Jesus uttered a final commitment of His spirit into the Father's hands. A centurion who witnessed these events glorified God, declaring that Jesus truly was righteous. Some groups of onlookers left the scene striking their chests in grief. A group that included women followers from Galilee stood at a distance and watched.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

FOCUSED (Luke 23:33-34)

The religious trials before the Sanhedrin and the secular trials before Herod and Pilate were over. Pilate reluctantly sentenced Jesus to death at the insistence of the crowd spurred on by the Jewish religious leaders. Soldiers then took Jesus and crucified Him; alongside Him they crucified two criminals, one on each side of Jesus' cross.

VERSE 33

When they arrived at the place called The Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals, one on the right and one on the left.

Luke identified **the place** of Jesus' execution as **The Skull**. The Greek term rendered *skull* is the basis of the modern English word *cranium*. Of the four New Testament Gospel writers, only Luke used this Greek term, perhaps for the benefit of his Gentile audience. The Greek term's Latin equivalent is the basis of the English term *Calvary*. (See the KJV rendering of verse 33.) The three other Gospel writers used the corresponding Aramaic term *Golgotha* yet also go on to explain that the term means "Place of the Skull" (see Matt. 27:33; Mark 15:22; John 19:17).

Modern Bible historians throughout the years have suggested a number of possible sites for the place of Jesus' crucifixion. One such site, sometimes referred to as "Gordon's Calvary," is a craggy hill that vaguely resembles a human skull. Today, however, most Bible scholars associate the crucifixion's location with the site of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.

Luke recorded that Jesus was **crucified** at *the place called The Skull*. Modern day executions in the United States are typically kept out of the public view. First-century Roman government, however, did exactly the opposite. Roman rulers intentionally crucified criminals and political enemies in open places for all to see. They did so for the purpose of deterring, intimidating, and terrorizing the general population.

Although various forms of crucifixion (death by impalement) had been practiced by barbaric tribes for centuries before the Roman era, the Romans perfected this kind of torturous execution to the extent that they confined its use to only certain groups—slaves, violent criminals, and those captured in war. Death by crucifixion was usually slow; a victim might hang helplessly, painfully, and unaided on the cross for days while life ebbed away. Some victims might be tied to their crosses with ropes, while others were affixed by

huge spikes driven through their hands (or wrist bones) and ankles. Victims were stripped of all clothing to add to their humiliation.

A notable instance of Rome's use of crucifixion prior to Jesus' death came in 71 BC following a slave rebellion led by Spartacus, a Thracian gladiator. Although Spartacus was killed in battle, the victorious Roman general, Marcus Licinius Crassus, ordered six thousand of Spartacus's captured troops to be crucified along the heavily traveled Appian Way. This grisly scene was dramatized—with a degree of historical license—in the 1960 American film titled *Spartacus*.

Luke reported that the two **criminals** (“malefactors,” KJV) crucified alongside Jesus were situated **one on the right and one on the left**. The Greek word rendered *criminals* literally means “doers of evil.” Both Matthew and Mark used a different Greek word that meant “thief, robber, bandit” or in some contexts “insurrectionist” (see Matt. 27:38; Mark 15:27). Jesus, of course, had committed none of these crimes, although the Jewish leaders had charged Him before Pilate with fomenting rebellion against Rome. In truth, Jesus was (and is) the sinless One who bore the penalty for all sinners!

VERSE 34

Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided his clothes and cast lots.

The saying of Jesus on the cross found in this verse appears only in Luke's Gospel. In the saying, Jesus called upon the heavenly **Father** to “**forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing.**” Exactly to whom the pronoun *them* refers is not clear. It could be a reference to the Roman soldiers who were carrying out a command of execution without any thought of Jesus' innocence. Or Jesus may have been referring to the Jewish leaders and people who cried out for His crucifixion. If so, He was putting into practice the hard truth He had taught His disciples—to forgive even one's enemies. Or perhaps the word *them* was a broad reference to all of sinful humanity. What a cruel tragedy that the one part of God's creation made in His image would be so sin-sick, so spiritually blind and wicked, as to crucify the Son of God—God in the flesh! Yet it was Jesus' prayer for our forgiveness that dramatically demonstrated God's unfathomable love for us while we were yet sinners (see Rom. 5:8).

While the pronoun *them* could refer to a broader group, the word **they** in the latter part of the verse clearly refers to the squad of soldiers conducting the execution. John 19:23-24 confirms that it was the soldiers who **divided Jesus' clothes and cast lots** for the garments, particularly a seamless tunic, or robe, that Jesus had been wearing.

The dying words of Stephen, the first martyr in church history, are probably based on this statement by Jesus from the cross (see Acts 7:60). Today, we also would do well to remember this statement of Jesus when we are tempted to respond in anger or vengeance toward those who offend us. If Jesus displayed a forgiving spirit on the cross, should we not show the same attitude of grace toward those who harm us in lesser ways?

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Cross, Crucifixion” on pages 368–371 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How did the crucifixion of Jesus fulfill Old Testament prophecies? Why did the cross become a central part of the preaching of the gospel? How would you explain to an unbeliever the significance of Jesus’ death on the cross?

MOCKED (Luke 23:35-39)

The focus in this section is on the reactions of four groups who witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus. At least three of the groups mocked Jesus with taunts that could be interpreted as temptations for Jesus to abort His saving mission at the last moment. The unbelievers who taunted Jesus unintentionally revealed the heart of His saving work in their jeering.

VERSE 35

The people stood watching, and even the leaders were scoffing: “He saved others; let him save himself if this is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One!”

The first group, and perhaps the only group that did not openly mock Jesus consisted of unspecified **people who stood watching** (“stood beholding,” KJV). These may have been curious bystanders who happened by the scene on their way into or out of the city of Jerusalem. The group also may have included the remnant of Jesus’ supporters who watched the crucifixion from a distance (see Luke 23:48-49).

A second group consisted of **the leaders** (“rulers,” KJV; ESV; NIV) who **were scoffing** (“derided,” KJV; “sneered,” NIV) at Jesus. These were the religious opponents of Jesus who followed the procession from the city to the place of execution to celebrate their victory in getting rid of Jesus—or so they thought. They mocked Jesus as a would-be deliverer who reportedly **saved others** but could not even **save himself**. They believed that if their

challenge of self-deliverance went unheeded, then Jesus' silence and inaction would discredit Him in the crowd's eyes to the claim that He was **God's Messiah, the Chosen One**. Some Bible commentators have pointed out that this mocking taunt (**if this is**) echoes two of the devil's temptations presented to Jesus at the outset of His ministry (see Luke 4:3,9). Indeed, Jesus did have the power to save Himself but chose rather to die on the cross to provide salvation for all who believe in Him.

VERSES 36-37

The soldiers also mocked him. They came offering him sour wine and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself!"

The third group around the crucifixion consisted of the Roman soldiers who were charged with the duty of carrying out the sentence of crucifixion. They **also mocked him** by offering Jesus **sour wine** ("vinegar," KJV; "wine vinegar," NIV) and shouting "**If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself!**"

Interestingly, the offer of wine vinegar prophetically fulfilled a statement found in Psalm 69:21, which reads: "Instead, they gave me gall for my food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." In other words, the soldiers likely did not offer the drink for the purpose of alleviating Jesus' suffering but to add to it. They appear to have echoed the cruel taunt of the religious leaders in challenging Jesus to save Himself from the cross. The words *if you are the king of the Jews* may have arisen from the placard affixed to the cross that Luke mentioned in the next verse.

VERSE 38

An inscription was above him: This Is the King of the Jews.

To add to the deterrent effect of an execution, Roman officials fastened **an inscription** ("superscription," KJV; "written notice," NIV) **above** a crucified person's head, detailing the crime. The sign over Jesus' head stated **This Is the King of the Jews**. John's Gospel adds that the statement was inscribed in three languages—Aramaic, Latin, and Greek (John 19:20). These were the dominant languages used in the holy land in the first century. John went on to report that the Jewish chief priests sought to get Pilate to revise the statement. They wanted it to specify that Jesus only claimed to be the King of the Jews, not that He actually was such a king.

The priests well knew that *King of the Jews* was a messianic title; it pointed to Jesus as the One who fulfilled the Lord's promise to King David that he would have a descendant who would reign forever (see 2 Sam. 7:12-16). The wise men had used this title when a star led them to Jerusalem in search of the One "who has been born king of the Jews" (Matt. 2:2). The crowds that

had praised God at Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem did so by shouting the words, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord" (Luke 19:38). In all likelihood, Pilate intended this royal inscription over Jesus' head not as truth but rather as an attempt to mock and threaten would-be rivals to his power. Ironically, he was revealing the truth about Jesus' identity.

VERSE 39

Then one of the criminals hanging there began to yell insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

A fourth group Luke reported as being part of the crucifixion scene was the two men crucified on either side of Jesus. In this verse, Luke revealed that **one of the criminals** picked up on the taunts being spewed by the religious leaders and soldiers. He too **began to yell insults at** ("railed on/at," KJV; ESV) Jesus, exclaiming, **"Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"** Pain and suffering can sometimes bring out the worst in human nature. Sadly, this individual attempted to alleviate his pain by heaping abuse on another. How sad to think that in the last moments of this man's life, he was so close to the Savior who could have given him eternal salvation and a place in God's kingdom that very day! He chose instead to die in rebellion and sin.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Christ, Christology" on pages 281–284 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What were the Jewish expectations of the coming Messiah in the first century AD? What did Jesus say His mission was as the Messiah in His first coming? What is the mission of Jesus Christ in His second coming?

TRUSTED (Luke 23:40-43)

These verses contrast with the previous verse by showing a different response to Jesus by the other criminal crucified alongside Him. The exchange between Jesus and this second man reveals the heart of Jesus' mission and has important implications for the doctrine of salvation by faith alone.

VERSE 40

But the other answered, rebuking him: "Don't you even fear God, since you are undergoing the same punishment?"

One of the men crucified alongside Jesus had joined with the mockers and scoffers around the cross. **The other** condemned man, hanging on the opposite side of Jesus, displayed a radically different attitude. Both criminals knew they were facing imminent death. One was unrepentant and, so far as we can judge, departed this life in anger and resistance to man's laws as well as God's law. The second criminal, on the other hand, appears to have displayed genuine repentance and saving faith.

After hearing the first criminal's verbal abuse of Jesus, the second rebuked him with a question: **"Don't you even fear God, since you are undergoing the same punishment?"** The second man attempted to warn the first that they were both about to come before God in judgment. Those who lack biblical knowledge or conviction about the afterlife deny the reality of judgment—that is, of giving an account of themselves to God after death. The second criminal acknowledged the reality of divine judgment and wanted to be prepared to stand before God.

VERSE 41

We are punished justly, because we're getting back what we deserve for the things we did, but this man has done nothing wrong."

The repentant criminal acknowledged his wrongdoing and confessed that the two of them were being **punished justly**. The man's understanding of justice was consistent with Old Testament law. That is, the two criminals were being repaid in kind **for the things** they **did**. This confession may be an indication that the two men had taken the lives of others in the past. In any event, the repentant criminal acknowledged that his crimes had been serious—that is, deserving of the death penalty. Further, he recognized that Jesus had **done nothing wrong**. How the man knew this truth about Jesus is not clear. The next verse suggests that he either knew Jesus or had heard about Him before the crucifixion.

It is important to emphasize at this point that true repentance begins with an honest admission of one's guilt and sinfulness. True repentance admits sin and then turns from it to embrace in faith the One who has broken sin's power. The repentant criminal gave evidence that he feared God and believed when he declared that Jesus was completely righteous.

VERSE 42

Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

This verse reveals that the repentant criminal had some degree of true understanding about Jesus and His divine mission. The man's expression of faith was extraordinary because of the situation. He almost certainly did not expect Jesus at this point to somehow escape the cross, defeat the Romans, and set Himself up as a ruler on earth. With eyes of faith, however, the repentant criminal saw in Jesus a different and vastly greater kind of ruler. He believed that Jesus would soon be ruling over a better, greater, more enduring kingdom. And he wanted to be part of that kingdom. He therefore pleaded, **“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”**

VERSE 43

And he said to him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Jesus responded to the man's expression of faith with an equally amazing pronouncement: **“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”** The term *paradise* appears only three times in the New Testament (Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 12:4; Rev. 2:7). It was, however, a familiar term in Jewish literature at this time and referred to the destination of the righteous after death. The phrase *with me* emphasizes the most important promise of salvation: heaven is where believers will forever be in the presence of God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Paradise” on page 1218 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How was the paradise of Eden lost by Adam and Eve? What does the promise of paradise to the repentant criminal tell us about Jesus? What does it promise for believers at death?

SACRIFICED (Luke 23:44-46)

These verses soberly describe the time that Jesus was on the cross and the final moments of His life. After three hours of darkness in the midday, the curtain of the sanctuary split as Jesus entrusted His spirit into the hands of the Father. Following His expression of commitment, Jesus died.

VERSES 44-45a

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three, because the sun's light failed.

Time-of-day references in the Greek text are usually designated in terms of hours. The “sixth hour” (see KJV; ESV) is thus translated into modern time as **about noon**, and “ninth hour” is rendered as **three p.m.** Luke’s point in this verse was to emphasize that **darkness came over the whole land** at a time when the sun was normally at its zenith—the brightest time of the day. The literal darkness was a terrifying portrait of the spiritual darkness (and judgment) that had fallen over humanity. It pointed to the time when Jesus became our substitute and bore the sins of the world in atonement.

VERSE 45b

The curtain of the sanctuary was split down the middle.

At some point in the three hours of darkness, **the curtain of the sanctuary** (“the veil of the temple,” KJV) **was split down the middle**. There were a number of curtains in the temple complex, but most Bible scholars opt for this *curtain* being either the one leading into the holy place (where the lampstand, incense altar, and table of showbread were located) or the one separating the holy place and the holy of holies (where the ark of the covenant rested). In either case, the message of the torn curtain suggested open access and communication between God and His people. Only Jesus’ atoning death made this open access possible.

VERSE 46

And Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit.” Saying this, he breathed his last.

The moment came; Jesus knew that He was about to enter the realm of physical death. As He had done at other critical moments in His journey, He prayed. **Jesus called out with a loud voice** to say, **“Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit.** This was a final display of obedience and trust in the Father’s plan of redemption. Jesus’ life was not taken from Him; He gave it up in obedience to the Father for us—sinners. The sovereignty of God is evident in the language emphasizing that Jesus was still in control.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Atonement” on pages 144–147 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How did Old Testament sacrifices picture the need for atonement? How can people obtain the benefits of Jesus’ atonement for sin?