

They Know Not What They Do  
Luke 23:26-43  
August 28, 2022  
Rev. Dave Dorst  
CenterPoint Church

Read Luke 23:26-43

*"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."* (Matthew 4:4b)

## Introduction

You may know the name Regina Spektor, a Russian-born pianist/singer/songwriter. One of her songs was featured at the end of the *Prince Caspian* Narnia movie. Listen to some of her lyrics from a song called, "Laughing With":

"God can be funny at a cocktail party while listening to a good God-themed joke / or when the crazies say He hates us and they get so red in the head you think they're about to choke / God can be funny when told He'll give you money if you just pray the right way / and when presented like a genie who does magic like Houdini / or grant wishes like Jiminy Cricket and Santa Claus / No one laughs at God in a hospital, no one laughs at God in a war / No one's laughing at God when they're starving or freezing or so very poor / No one laughs at God when the doctor calls after some routine tests / No one laughs at God when their airplane starts to uncontrollably shake / No one laughs at God when the cops knock on their door and they say we got some bad news, sir. / No one's laughing at God when there's a famine, fire, or a flood."

In our passage this morning, we see God being laughed at, scoffed at, ridiculed, and mocked by multiple groups of people. These are the last hours of Jesus' life and there were many in the crowd, many in positions of governmental or religious authority, even the soldiers, who decided that Jesus was worthy of their jeering and abuse. To them, He was just one more man who deserved to die and was an easy target for them to have sport with. But by the end of the day, as in the song, the sarcasm and disdain would die out, no one would be laughing at God anymore.

As we look at this passage, we should be reminded that church history, particularly the Catholic church, has traditionally recognized fourteen what are called Stations of the Cross. You've probably been inside churches that have the Stations commemorated in stained glass windows so that you can follow Jesus' journey from His trial to His tomb. The name for the path that Jesus took to the cross is Via Dolorosa, the "Road of Sorrows" or the "Way of Suffering." Most of the stations are derived from Scripture, though some of them, like Veronica's Veil, were invented at some point in time:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| Station 1 - Jesus being condemned to death     | Station 2 - Jesus given His cross to carry                  |
| Station 3 - Jesus falls the first time         | Station 4 - Jesus meets His mother                          |
| Station 5 - Simon of Cyrene picks up the cross | Station 6 - Veronica wipes Jesus' face                      |
| Station 7 - Jesus falls the second time        | Station 8 - Jesus warns the mourning women                  |
| Station 9 - Jesus falls the third time         | Station 10 - Jesus' clothes are taken away                  |
| Station 11 - Jesus is nailed to the cross      | Station 12 - Jesus dies on the cross                        |
| Station 13 - Jesus' body is taken down         | Station 14 - Jesus' body is placed in the tomb <sup>1</sup> |

Our passage last week ended with Pilate condemning Jesus, so that was Station 1. We get as far as Station 8 in our first six verses:

## I. Down the Road of Sorrows: Mercy for Bystanders (vv. 26-31)

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.catholic.org/prayers/station.php>

*26 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. 27 And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. 28 But turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. 29 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!' 30 Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' 31 For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"*

The custom was that the man condemned to die would carry his own cross to the place where he was to be crucified, and that they took the longest route there so that he would be an example to everyone watching. Jesus was so weak from being flogged, beaten, and losing so much blood, not to mention being up all night and being forced to carry a hundred-pound beam, that He stumbled and fell. So someone had to carry the cross for Him. Roman law provided that a soldier could force anyone to carry a burden the distance of a mile, a practice called "impressment." This is probably what Jesus was referring to in the Sermon on the Mount when He said that if you were called upon to carry a burden for one mile, go ahead and carry it for two (Matthew 5:41).<sup>2</sup> So the soldiers picked out a random man named Simon to carry the cross the rest of the way.

It's interesting that three of the Gospel writers gave the name of Simon of Cyrene; Cyrene is in modern-day Libya, in north Africa. They could have just said that the soldiers forced a bystander to carry Jesus' cross. Mark (15:21) even gives the name of his two sons, Alexander and Rufus. What is going on with this level of specificity, besides adding details as a historical account? You would only give these names if they had some significance to the original readers. In Romans 16:13, Paul says, "*Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well.*" Both Mark and Paul wrote their books to the Church in Rome, so there's a good possibility that this Rufus is the son of Simon, and both he and his mother had become very dear to Paul. So even if Simon was plucked out of the crowd at random, it seems that he was so moved by his encounter with Jesus that he and his family eventually became followers of the Way.<sup>3</sup> We don't know that for sure, but the evidence seems to point to that. Additionally, the image of someone else bearing Jesus' cross should be striking to every believer who knows that Jesus told us that if we are to follow Him, we must carry our crosses daily (Luke 9:23).

Once more, Jesus warns about the events of AD 70 and the fall of Jerusalem; it's the seventh time that He's prophesied about it. It's striking to me that Jesus took the time in the middle of His death march to warn these women – "don't weep for me, weep for yourselves" for what's coming. The usual Jewish view was that "blessed is the fruitful womb and those with many children," but Jesus says the opposite. "Blessed will be the barren womb and the childless" in that day when the city is destroyed, the judgment coming on the nation by God and executed by Rome. The text says that these women were mourning and lamenting Jesus; He mourned for them knowing the awful things that were coming.

The next section arrives at the crucifixion site:

## **II. To the Place of the Skull: Forgiveness for Enemies (vv. 32-38)**

*32 Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 33 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. 34 And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. 35 And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" 36 The soldiers also mocked him,*

---

<sup>2</sup> Michael Card, *Luke: The Gospel of Amazement* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011), p. 255.

<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 283.

coming up and offering him sour wine <sup>37</sup> and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"  
<sup>38</sup> There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

The first thing we need to see in this passage is that the first five verses in a row – verses 32 to 36 – are direct fulfillments of Old Testament prophecies:

-Verse 32 fulfilled Isaiah 53:12 ("He poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.")

-Verse 33 fulfilled Psalm 22:16 ("...A company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet.")

-Verse 34 fulfilled Psalm 22:18 ("they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.")

-Verse 35 fulfilled Psalm 22:7 ("All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads.")

-Verse 36 fulfilled Psalm 69:21 ("They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.")

I want to stop and think about prophetic fulfillment for a minute. I don't know if you've ever heard the statistical probability that one man could fulfill the 48 major Old Testament prophecies about the coming Messiah, but it's mind-blowing. Here's how Peter Stoner in *Science Speaks* describes it (Josh McDowell quoted): "The chance that any one man fulfilled just eight prophecies (is) 1 in 10<sup>17</sup>." You say, that sounds big, but not sure how big. Imagine taking 100 trillion silver dollars and laying "them on the face of Texas. They will cover all of the state two feet deep. Now mark one of these silver dollars and stir the whole mass thoroughly, all over the state. Blindfold a man and tell him that he can travel as far as he wishes, but he must pick up one silver dollar and say that this is the right one. What chance would he have of getting the right one? Just the same chance that the prophets would have had of writing these eight prophecies and having them all come true in any one man... We find the chance that any one man fulfilled all 48 prophecies to be 1 in 10<sup>157</sup>."<sup>4</sup> That's an inconceivably larger stack of silver dollars and impossible to fulfill. Yet Jesus fulfilled every single one because the prophecies were not written in human wisdom but by the all-knowing God.

Crucifixion was an incredibly brutal form of execution perfected by the Roman government. You don't conquer as many nations as they did by asking nicely and extending a lot of mercy. So they knew how to kill someone in a way that sent a message. Jesus' crucifixion happened at a place called the Skull. Have you ever been confused because some of the old songs and sermons refer to the place where Jesus was crucified as Golgotha and some refer to it as Calvary? The Greek word Luke used was *Kranion*, which means Skull. In Aramaic, the name is *Golgatha* and in Latin, the name is *calvaria*. So all three names are English versions of different languages. It's a hill that looked like a skull. When my family went to Israel in the summer of 1990, one of my vivid memories is seeing the outline of a skull on the side of the hill that our tour guide said was likely where Jesus was crucified.

Jesus has been through a very difficult twelve hours – He was arrested, chained, mocked, tortured, whipped, and then made to drag a heavy cross through the city. Now He had been nailed to that cross and it had been raised up into place. He would have had to start pushing His body up to get breaths, since crucifixion usually ended with the person suffocating to death. Jesus must have been thinking a lot of things; we have to imagine that He was thinking about His life and His obedience to the Father, possibly how this would all be over soon. He could have declared to anyone present that they just made a huge mistake, and that God would be judging them and exacting justice for killing His Son. But

---

<sup>4</sup> Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands A Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life, 1986), p. 167.

what came out of His mouth was love – “*Father, forgive them.*” The Man who had taught His followers to “*love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*” (Matthew 5:44) certainly heeded His own advice. If the perfect, sinless Jesus’ reflex was to forgive those who wronged Him, how can we, who are full of sin, hold onto our grudges and anger for the offenses committed against us? If there’s someone right now that you’re struggling to forgive, pray for the Lord’s strength and grace to forgive them. Look to the cross and marvel at His forgiveness.

The second part of that is “*they know not what they do*” – because if they had known that they were crucifying the Lord of the Universe, the all-powerful Creator who holds all things in His hands, they surely would not have crucified Him. Jesus’ request of the Father to forgive those who were crucifying Him points to the greater reality of what was happening – that His death was the very thing that would accomplish the forgiveness of all of the sins of His people in all times. His prayer would be made possible by His actions. Sometimes people wonder if they’ve sinned so grievously that God can’t forgive them; I’ve heard people say that God couldn’t forgive someone like me. But if this section says anything to us, it says that if Jesus can forgive those who crucified Him, then He can forgive you anything that you’ve done! Charles Spurgeon, the great British preacher, saw this forgiveness extended to more than just the people who crucified Jesus: “into that pronoun ‘them’ I feel that I can crawl. Can you get in there? Oh, by a humble faith, appropriate the cross of Christ by trusting in it; and get into that big little word ‘them’!”<sup>5</sup>

Verse 38 says that there was an inscription above Jesus that said, “*This is the King of the Jews.*” John’s Gospel says that it was written in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek to make it understandable for as many people as possible. It was customary in Roman crucifixions for the crime to be specified on a tablet nailed to the cross so that everyone who saw it would know why this person was being killed. It had the added benefit of warning anyone who thought about committing that same crime what the punishment could be. But because Pilate could not find anything of which He was guilty, he decided to just write “King of the Jews,” probably to anger the Jewish leaders who had pressured him into his decision to crucify Jesus. In John’s Gospel, the priests asked Pilate to change it, but he refused. And what we see is that Jesus was crucified for being who He really was. And the irony is that what they have meant as contempt was the truth; that sign turned the cross into a throne.<sup>6</sup> And it’s an invitation to all who see it then and now to bow down in reverent worship to the true King.

The last passage shows someone whose belief in Jesus had him

### **III. Heading to Paradise: Salvation for the Condemned (vv. 39-43)**

*39 One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” 40 But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” 42 And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” 43 And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

It’s interesting how often Luke puts two people in front of us to show us how they are different so that it can press the question of which one you will be like: The prodigal son or the older son? The Pharisee or the tax collector? Mary or Martha? Jesus or Barabbas? These five verses subtly ask which criminal on the cross you are like. Keep in mind that these guys were not hanging on crosses for petty crimes, these were political insurrectionists/terrorists. One of them had started verbally abusing Jesus: “Hey, I heard you’re the Christ, the Messiah. Why don’t you do something about this if that’s really who you

---

<sup>5</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “Christ’s Plea for Ignorant Sinners,” *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim), 38:318.

<sup>6</sup> Thabiti Anyabwile, *Exalting Jesus in Luke* (Nashville: Holman, 2018), p. 346.

are?” It was both mockery and his very last attempt at getting out of dying and being punished for his crimes. He died a bitter man, only interested in Jesus if He could help him and get him off that cross and out of the punishment that he deserved. Maybe we see ourselves in this man; maybe you’re like that criminal and you say, “If you’re the Christ, why can’t you save my marriage? If you’re the Christ, why did you let my mother die of cancer? If you’re the Christ, why can’t you stop the awful things happening to me?” And if you are consumed with this anger and you think that you deserve better and that Jesus should provide it for you, then you might die bitter as well.

The other criminal turned on him and rebuked him: “You and I are getting what we deserve, but this man has done nothing wrong.” I don’t know how he knew that about Jesus; perhaps it was just watching Him accept all this punishment with dignity, perhaps it was the prayer for God to grant forgiveness, certainly it was revealed to Him by the Holy Spirit. He then turned to Jesus and gave a big ask. Not a whole lot different from the first man’s request, it’s something personal and selfish. But it’s not to spare him from death, it’s to spare him condemnation in the next life: “*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*” And that’s when Jesus told him that He would be in Paradise with Him. You might think that this criminal didn’t do enough to merit the amazing gift of eternal life he was given; he was simply taking his last chance to avoid being condemned. There was no long repentance, no time to get baptized, to obey God and be tested to see if His faith was genuine. He probably didn’t even read any Bible verses, didn’t have time to tithe or help others. How could he be saved? But think about what He did do: he confessed his sins, he acknowledged the justice and holiness of God the Father, he believed in the innocence of Jesus, and last but not least, he trusted in Jesus to deliver him into heaven, acknowledging that He is the King.<sup>7</sup> And that’s all any of us have to do to find salvation! Does that challenge your sense of fairness, does it outrage you that you’ve done way more things for God in your life than this terrorist who “found faith in a foxhole”? If so, you need to read the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, Matthew 20:1-16. God gives grace on whom He chooses.

Think about the fact that the criminal put his faith in a bloody, defeated man close to death, with a mocking crown of thorns on His head and a mocking sign proclaiming Him king. As Frank Barker said, “It is one thing to believe he is a king when you see him raise the dead, or when you see him create bread and fish, stop a storm, open a blind man’s eyes. But it is another thing to believe it when you see him dying. He is bleeding like you are bleeding, and he has got nail prints in his hands like you have got nail prints in your hands, and he is in terribly agony like you are in terrible agony... and this man is the king? This man is the Son of God?”<sup>8</sup>

But this criminal had faith, and he understood that the Man dying next to him was truly the King, the Lord who held the keys to paradise and could grant him entrance. The two criminals represent all of humanity – some will reject Jesus and some will cling to Him for salvation and eternal life. The two men had opposite reactions to Jesus, and they remind us that there will always be two ways to see Him: unbelief because Jesus doesn’t seem to be who He says He is and that He won’t get me what I want. Or belief based on looking at Jesus and understanding that He truly is God incarnate. This is a reminder to each of us that if we have acknowledged Jesus as Lord that as soon as we die we’ll be in the presence of the Lord. It’s also a reminder that even the hardest of criminals can turn to Jesus moments before death and find salvation. But don’t assume you can put off repentance and turning to Jesus until later; you have no control over your life and there is no guarantee you won’t die suddenly. Not to mention that if you’ve hardened your heart enough to ignore Jesus now, you’ll most likely continue hardened in your heart and never turn to Him. Don’t delay, embrace Jesus now!

---

<sup>7</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *Luke 14-23: On the Road to Jerusalem* (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2021), p. 211.

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Frank M. Barker, *The Gospel of Luke, Vol. 2* (Self-published), “Good News for a Dying Thief” sermon, p. 5.

## Conclusion

Did you notice that three different groups of people told Jesus to save Himself?

- The Jewish rulers in verse 35 – *“He saved others, let him save himself,”*
- The soldiers in verse 36 – *“If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”* and
- The angry criminal in verse 39 – *“Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!”*

This was all mockery, pointing out that Jesus surely couldn't be the King and the Christ if He couldn't save Himself. But the irony is that the only way He could be the King and the Christ in God's redemption plan was if He did not save Himself in order that He could be killed to save others. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus says that He could have summoned twelve legions of angels (a legion is 6,000, so 72,000 angels) to save Him. But that would have upended God's redemption plan for His people. Jesus had to go through with dying and could not escape it and save Himself; it would have doomed all of us. Bill Crowder said it well, “The crowd is working from the assumption that it is weakness that is keeping Him attached to the cross, when in actuality it was His omnipotent strength! Wonderfully, it was not nails or rope or guards that held Him there, but rather it was the invisible cords of divine love.”<sup>9</sup>

The words of a great hymn, “Man of Sorrows” by Philip Bliss: “Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned He stood. Sealed my pardon with His blood, Hallelujah, what a Savior!” Don't weep for Jesus, He has endured the cross and died in our place. Like He told the women along the way, we should instead think about our own deaths and the reality that we will be facing judgment one day. Use the occasion of looking at Jesus' death as a time to reflect on your own soul: if you died soon, even tonight, would you be right with God the Father? If you were facing judgment, have you found salvation in Jesus? Will you face God's wrath or God's mercy? Jesus had compassion on the women of Jerusalem, on the soldiers who had whipped and nailed Him, and on a terrorist dying next to Him. He will certainly have mercy on you if you come to Him in faith and humility. No one gets to heaven unless Jesus' actions on the cross usher them into the kingdom! Come to Him and hear Him say, *“Today, you will be with me in paradise.”*

## Benediction

Philippians 4:19-20 - *“And my God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.”*

---

<sup>9</sup> Bill Crowder, *For This He Came: Jesus' Journey to the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Discovery, 2006), p. 153.