

Did Jesus Have to Die?
Luke 23:26-43

Jesus. We read that they now led Jesus away for His execution.

Take your Bible and turn to our passage in Luke 23:26-43.

Let's first look at the people around the cross.

I posed this question for consideration in your Adult Impact discussion: Why did Jesus have to die?

I. THE PEOPLE AROUND THE CROSS

Let's see if we can unwrap that question from the passage that is before us. It is a fitting discussion as we prepare for communion.

A. The Military

The people around the cross
The punishment on the cross
The pardon at the cross

These are the hardened soldiers of Rome's army tasked with the responsibility of carrying out the execution. They may be the very ones who carried out the flogging in the Praetorium. There was no love lost between them and the Jews.

There are many wonderful and moving hymns.
When Peace Like a River
Holy, Holy, Holy
And so on

They are the ones leading Jesus away from Pilate's judgment hall to the place of execution. A conviction brought no compassion from them toward those whose destiny was death. They were fulfilling their sworn duty, their obligation to carry out the sentence.

But there are none so stirring to my heart as those that have to do with the cross or Christ's shed blood.
The Cross Upon Which Jesus Died
And Can It Be
At the Cross
Beneath the Cross of Jesus
Near the Cross
When I Survey the Wondrous Cross
The Old Rugged Cross
There is Power in the Blood
Are You Washed in the Blood
Nothing but the Blood

This was not the first crucifixion. The Persians had invented the practice some 600 years earlier, but it was Rome who had perfected death by crucifixion so that it would inflict the maximum amount of pain and suffering. The longest crucifixion recorded lasted nine days. Medical doctors have written articles and books detailing the extent of suffering enduring by victims of crucifixion. We won't detail that today, just know that it was a horrific ordeal based on its description. Perhaps the best and most graphic depiction of it is in the movie produced by Mel Gibson – *The Passion*, and yet some claim that even his portrayal did not depict the extent of brutality and suffering. Many who were flogged didn't make it to the crucifixion.

And there are many others that point us to the necessity of the cross and the benefit of it. Without the crucifixion there is no salvation. Communion is a reminder of the finished work of Christ in redemption procuring for us what we do not deserve, but what He freely gives by faith. Communion is a time to remember but also a time to give thanks for the cross.
At the demand of the people stirred by the religious leaders Pilate had pronounced a death sentence on

Those being led to their death by the Roman soldiers were already convicted and judgment was swift with no appeals. Their brutality would only add to the suffering. We see that in how they treated Jesus. We read in Luke's account from vs. 36 that they joined in the barrage of mockery hurled

at Jesus, this coming after they had already beat and scourged Him.

They mocked Him with their words – “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”

They mocked Him with their actions – vs. 36 also says they offered Him wine vinegar. This was a mockery of His claim to be a king. After he had been flogged and beaten they put a robe on him and pretended to bow down to Him. The material was made of wool and would create irritation on his already tender skin ripped open from the flogging. They crammed a crown of thorns onto His head. Now they pretended to serve the king by offering Him a bitter drink of wine vinegar.

The soldiers had no affinity toward the Jewish religion or its people. So, they mocked Him. The tense indicates that this was continuous throughout the crucifixion.

The soldiers were around the cross.

B. The Man - Simon of Cyrene

Here is a worshipper come from the northern part of Africa for the Passover celebration. Here is an innocent bystander caught in the drama of the crucifixion. He was perhaps on his way to the Temple for Morning Prayer when the processional of Soldiers and criminals was led out of the city.

One of the soldiers guarding Jesus saw Him continue to struggle to carry the cross. Whether they carried the whole cross or just the cross beam, scholars suggest that it could have weighed upwards of 200 pounds. A combination of factors contributed to His inability to manage the cross by Himself. There was fatigue from being up all night. There were the beatings and significant loss of blood. We must also consider the emotional toll on Jesus in what was yet before Him as He took on the sin of the world dying as a substitute for us.

The soldier forced Simon to carry the cross for Jesus or with Jesus. He had now come face to face with the real Passover sacrifice.

We can only speculate what Simon must have thought as he was forced into carrying this man's cross. Carrying a cross meant the bearer was guilty. Because he was carrying this cross would people think that he was guilty of some crime?

What did Simon think when he read the placard that indicated the crime for which Jesus was guilty?

“The King of the Jews”

Did his mind flash back to the Old Testament prophecies around the promised king, the Messiah? Did he remember the promise given to David that someone from his family line would sit on the throne forever? Did it become clear to Him? If this was the king, was His reign to end before it even began?

Whatever plans Simon had for the morning were now divinely altered. It was not happenstance that led the soldier to pick Simon out of the throng of people that were along the road to Golgotha. Mark includes for us that he was the father of Alexander and Rufus. Scholars believe that Mark includes their names because they were known by his audience. Paul includes Rufus in his salutation to Rome. Many believe that Simon was saved here and took the gospel back Cyrene in Northern Africa and built the first church there.

The man Simon was around the cross.
How about the multitude?

C. The Multitude

We aren't told how many were there, only that a large number of people followed. The intent of a public execution was for its fear factor. It was a way of keeping people under Rome's jurisdiction from thinking about rebelling. It was a way of showing what would happen to anyone who dared rise up against the Empire. It is said that Antiochus

Epiphenes crucified so many people they had to stop because they ran out of wood.

Maybe some in the crowd were curious about the crucifixion of Jesus. A week earlier many of them in the crowd may have been singing praise to this king as He rode into Jerusalem, but now, here they are chanting in agreement that He should be crucified. Perhaps they followed because they were curious to see whether or not this man would try to save Himself.

We read in verse 35 that most were there to cast insults at Jesus. Their hearts were darkened and just like the rest mocked Him as He hung there dying.

The multitudes were around the cross.
Among the crowd were the mourners.

D. The Mourners

Some suggest they were paid mourners who often showed up when someone was going to die. It added to the drama of the ordeal. Jesus responded to these women with a warning of judgment that would come on Jerusalem. In 40 years His warning would come true when Rome would destroy Jerusalem. It would be better not to have children than to experience such suffering. At that time people would seek death rather than to endure the destruction they would face.

A tree that is green was a symbol of innocence. If they killed an innocent person what would happen to them in the dry time when they rejected Him?

There were mourners around the cross.
How about the two miscreants, the thieves that were crucified with Him?

E. The Two Miscreants – Thieves

Some suggest that they were part of the insurrection that Barabbas had led. We don't know that for sure.

Luke merely describes them as criminals, obviously guilty of their crimes. We find that they also joined in the railing against Jesus. One even went so far as to mock Him by challenging Jesus not only to save Himself if He was the Christ, but also save them. It was a similar temptation to the one posed by Satan in the wilderness baiting Jesus to turn stones to bread, jump from a tower to be rescued by angels, or fall in worship in order to be given the kingdoms of the world – If you are who you claim to be then let's see you get us all out of this mess.

Their heart was no different than the others around the cross.

Finally, there are the Religious rulers.

F. The Religious Rulers

They are the instigators of His crucifixion, the ones who, out of envy, delivered Jesus up to Pilate. They never relented in their mockery of Jesus. They stood smugly watching their nemesis writhing in pain. How gleefully they must have watched as Jesus hung there dying.

This was all foretold in Psalm 22.

“But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. All who see Me mock Me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue Him. Let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him.” (vs. 6-8)

Those are the people around the cross. Their mockery is relentless and cruel. Now consider for a moment the punishment on the cross.

II. THE PUNISHMENT ON THE CROSS

We have already considered briefly the agony of the cross, not only the physical pain associated with the crucifixion and the emotional pain associated with the relentless mocking by those around the cross. So I don't want to touch on them here. But I do want to talk about another punishment Christ

endured on the cross.

Isaiah 53

The punishment we deserved He took. He was forsaken by God on account of our sin so that we would not be forsaken by God.

Romans 6:23

I Peter 1:18-19

I Peter 2:24

I Peter 3:18

Up until the moment of the crucifixion, the Father and the Son had known only perfect fellowship. By taking our sin on Himself, that fellowship was severed for a time and the Father turned His back on the Son. He cried out asking why the Father had forsaken or abandoned Him.

Why did Jesus have to die? Was it necessary for Jesus to die?

Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin and it had to be His blood and nothing else. It infers then that if His blood was not shed on the cross then we would not and could not be forgiven. Eternal life could not be offered to anyone without the death of Christ, the shedding of His blood for us. How appropriate is the hymn we sing:

What can wash away my sin – nothing but the blood of Jesus.

What can make me whole again – nothing but the blood of Jesus.

O precious is the flow that makes me white as snow.

No other fount I know nothing but the blood of Jesus.

I know a fount where sins are washed away;
I know a place where night is turned to day.
Burdens are lifted; blind eyes made to see.
There's a wonder working pow'r in the blood of Calvary.

Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. But understand that it was totally and completely a voluntary act on His part to go to the cross. So why did He go to the cross?

He went because He loves us.

He went because without His sacrifice we would be forever chained in sin destined for an eternity separated from God.

Scripture states that He has loved us with an everlasting love. He went to the cross because He loves us.

The great English Pastor John R.W. Stott has rightly stated that “My sins sent Him there (to the cross), but His love took Him there.”

Scottish hymn writer Horatius Bonar has aptly put the punishment of the cross in perspective.

“Twas I that shed the sacred blood;
I nailed Him to the tree;
I crucified the Christ of God;
I joined the mockery.

Of all the shouting multitude
I feel that I am one;
And in that din of voices rude
I recognize my own.

Around the cross the throng I see,
Mocking the Sufferer's groan;
Yet still my voice it seems to be,
As if I mocked alone.

My sin, your sin, our sin, the sin of Adam and Eve, the sin of one, the sin of all was why Jesus had to suffer the punishment of the cross. We are all responsible for the punishment Jesus endured before and on the cross. There was no other way by which our sin could be atoned for, no other way by which we could be brought back into a right relationship with God. The penalty of sin demanded death and out of love Jesus substituted Himself in our place.

It was a death we deserved, so while my sins sent Him there, His love took Him there. Through the shedding of His blood our sins are washed away. Now that was His part in salvation. Our part is to believe.

Say it with me – What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus. Oh, precious is the flow that makes me white as snow.
It was the promise made to Adam and Eve and all their posterity on the day they died spiritually that God would send someone to crush the head of the serpent even though He Himself would be bruised.

It was the prophecy Isaiah made that on Him all our iniquities would be laid. The one who knew no sin, would become sin for us

J.S. Stewart adds: “Not only had Christ by dying disclosed the sinner’s guilt, not only had He revealed the Father’s love: He had actually taken the sinner’s place. And this meant, since ‘God as in Christ’, that God had taken that place. When destruction and death were rushing up to claim the sinner as their prey, Christ had stepped in and accepted the full weight of their inevitable doom in His body and soul.”

Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

Without the cross there is no pardon.

So praise God for the cross.

Praise God for pardon at the cross.

III. THE PARDON AT THE CROSS

In the hours that seemed to pass like days on a calendar, one of the other criminals began to contemplate eternity. He heard the accusations and saw the witness of Jesus on the cross. He heard the Savior speak words of forgiveness. Whether those words were intended solely for the religious rulers or the guards or the multitude is really unclear. Some scholars suggest this is a general prayer

offered on behalf of all. What it does so vividly point to is this, and if you get nothing else I say get this one thing: If Christ was willing to forgive those who committed the ultimate act of rebellion against Him by crucifying Him, don’t you think that He will also forgive you and me?

This thief began to defend Jesus’ innocence. He knew he was guilty of his crime and deserved his death, but not Jesus. He asked Jesus to remember him when He came into His kingdom. Through all the physical suffering on the cross his mind was clear about Jesus.

There are three evidences of his conversion.

1. He feared God and his own judgment. He admitted his own sin by saying his punishment was just. He wasn’t afraid of the ones killing his body, he was afraid of the one who would judge his soul.
2. He had a changed heart. He sensed his sin and admitted he was a sinner. His sin had left his soul bankrupt. He had nothing to offer God and fell on the mercy of God. “Remember me.”
3. He believed in Jesus by understanding that only He could offer pardon and grant eternal life. He knew that if he confessed his sin, that God was faithful and just to forgive him of his sin and cleanse him from all unrighteousness.

This repentant sinner asked that one day he would be pardoned and offered heaven, but Jesus promised it to him that day. Jesus assured the man of his eternal destiny. That day He would be in heaven.

Death was not just another event in the life of Jesus but the very purpose of it that through His death, He could save the sinner.

It was not by chance that Jesus died between two others. They represent the two destinies of man. On the one hand there will be those who refuse to

admit their guilt and die in their sin. On the other hand are those who admit their guilt and repent of it and by faith believe Jesus' shed blood paid for their debt.

The penitent thief opened His heart to God and said yes to the salvation offered by Christ through His death on the cross. We were not there physically at the cross as were the other people gathered around to watch Jesus die, but we were there in the mind of Christ as He took our sin. He knew about us as He was dying on the cross on our behalf.

Galatians 2:20 sums up the work of the cross: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, *who loved me and gave Himself for me.*" (emphasis mine)

Did Christ have to go to the cross? Yes!
Why did He go to the cross? He went because He loves me. He went because He loves you. It was the only way for us to go from punishment to pardon.

O how He loves you and Me!
O how He loves you and Me!
He gave His life; what more could He give?
O how He loves you;
O how He loves me;
O how He loves you and Me!

Jesus to Calv'ry did go;
His love for sinners to show.
What He did there bro't hope from despair.
O how He loves you;
O how He loves me;
O how He loves you and Me!

The cross upon which Jesus died
Is a shelter in which we can hide;
And His grace so free is sufficient for me,
And deep is its fountain – as wide as the sea.

Have you been to the cross?

There's room at the cross for you;
There's room at the cross for you;
Tho' millions have come,
There's still room for one.
Yes, there's room at the cross for you.

"Jesus remember me when You come into Your kingdom." Ask today and the promise of heaven is yours. If you have already done this, communion is a time of remembrance and thanksgiving.