

# The crucifixion in Luke

When we arrive at Easter every year we know the story and repeat the rituals, often without rediscovering the breathtaking reality of God's love. On a recent Sunday my worship experience was energized by new joy as the choir sang an unfamiliar anthem based on the idea of Jesus' suffering and death as a dance of joy! The underlying melody was that Jesus' living and dying are part of the outpouring of God's grace, a crescendo of incomparable hope. Luke's account of the crucifixion is powerful and insightful as he marvels at Jesus giving his life, passing through the midnight of death and throwing open the brilliant portals of heaven for us.



**Michael Olmsted**

Luke's account of Jesus' death can be divided into three parts, based on three of what we call "the seven last words" he uttered from the cross. Compare this version to the other Gospels.

The first words Jesus said were, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing" (v. 34). The first word is "forgiveness," not a casual, easy or shallow word. This forgiveness is created in the heart of God, expressed and made real through generations of a chosen people who rebelled, dishonored God in their words and actions and returned several times to the one who never stopped loving them. This forgiveness invites us to seek God's grace when the world has deceived us, seduced us, infected us with death and blinded us to our only real hope in God's love. The truth and power of this forgiveness is verified when we express it in our relationships.

The Apostle Peter struggled with Jesus' teachings about forgiveness and wanted to know how many times we should forgive, up to seven times? Jesus' response, as many as 77 times, shocks our comfortable ideas of generosity and compassion,

for it means beyond counting! (Matthew 18:21-22). Jesus always reaches beyond theological theory to practical living. The cross is about forgiveness as we experience it in Christ's death and resurrection and share it with others.

The second word is "salvation," startling in its contrast to mockery and rejection (vv. 35-43). The religious leaders mocked: "He saved others. Let him save himself if he really is the Christ, the chosen one" (v. 35). The Roman soldiers offered him cheap wine and echoed the bitter words of the leaders (vv. 36-37). One of the two thieves crucified with Jesus echoed the same mockery: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" (v. 39).

The other thief, in the midst of this derision, repudiated the words of the first thief, cited their crimes, then turned to Jesus for hope: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (v. 42). We call this a "deathbed conversion," which implies last resort or fear motivation. In the center of the hatred, derision and fear of that experience, we witness a man who, by the grace of God, seeks forgiveness and hope in his darkness. Jesus' answer dispels all doubts we may have about the thief's sincerity and the power of God's grace as the dying Christ says, "I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise" (v. 43).

This means that when we come to worship our God and Savior in the splendor of heaven, along with Moses and Elijah, Peter and Luke, the martyrs of years gone by, there will be a thief who died beside Jesus on Calvary. The reproach to sin, to the judgment of this world, to the selfishness that divides us and invents cruelty, is the grace of God found in Christ.

In the final moments of the cross we see the crucial concept of "trust." Darkness covered the earth, the great curtain before the holy of holies in the Temple is torn in two and Jesus cries out of his agony, "Father, into your hands I entrust my life" (v. 46).

## Formations

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Scripture: Luke 23:32-46

This is a quote from Psalm 31:5: "I entrust my spirit into your hands; you, Lord, God of faithfulness — you have saved me." Jesus adds the word "Father," telling us once more that God is not impersonal, unknowable or unreachable. God is our loving Parent, who watches us grow up, make mistakes, rebel and dishonor him, yet remains open to that moment when we will turn to him and trust him to embrace us with grace so that we may become his whole and faithful children.

Consider what you have to give God: attendance at church, reading a certain number of chapters in the Bible daily, giving to fund missions, volunteering at a homeless shelter. The list is long and varied, but there is only one gift that you cannot offer with pride and a sense of accomplishment, one gift that invests meaning in all the others. Trust — to trust God with your life, your entire imperfect life! Out of that trust comes faith, the desire to do for others, love shaped by the example of Jesus and hope that can never be destroyed by all the dark forces of our world.

As you approach Easter this year, consider the dominant force within your life. These are troubling days and you are assaulted by destructive and hopeless voices. You may think these are the worst of times and wonder how long God will allow it to continue. Such was the world of Jesus' day. On a dark Friday outside Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, the Son of God was nailed to a Roman cross, surrounded by dying criminals and derision.

In that moment between this world and eternity, Jesus trusted the Father with his life and gave himself away so that each of us can know true hope. This is the "dance" of Easter!

*Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.*