

Jesus Saves Others, But Not Himself

Luke 23:26-49

This week's reading covers the crucifixion of Christ, and various responses to his suffering. After a couple of brief but significant vignettes, the bulk of the reading focuses on an irony of salvation: In particular, given that Jesus offered to save others, why does he not save himself? Mark and Matthew each record the same insult by his persecutors, but only once (Mark 15:31; Matt 27:42). Luke develops the irony in a full paragraph in three parts.

Day 1: Luke 23:26 Simon: a model of discipleship?

The case of Simon illustrates one of the challenges of interpreting historical narrative. Since narrative makes its point implicitly, interpretation necessarily seeks out the clues to meaning which the author provides, such as thematic repetition or recurring vocabulary. (Luke provides a clear example of both in the second half of this passage.) In this case, what role does Simon play in the narrative? In particular, is this just a random historical note, or is he an example of discipleship, as Jesus lays it out in Luke 9:23 (cf. Luke 14:27), "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me"?

Though some commentators have interpreted Simon as a model of discipleship, Luke probably does not intend this. For one thing, Simon does not take up his own cross: instead, he happens to pass by when the Romans press him into service. For another, had Luke intended such an association, he could have provided a clue by using the same words for 'carry' or 'follow'. Yet the key words from the earlier texts are absent in 23:26, and the terms used in 23:26 never appear in the New Testament for metaphorical discipleship. Since neither the theme nor the language of discipleship appears here, likely this proposed link is clever, but overreaching.

Is Simon, then, just a random historical note, a mere curiosity? Likely not. Mark adds a further interesting description of Simon as 'the father of Alexander and Rufus' (Mark 15:21). Simon came from 'the country', actually, from the distant town of Cyrene, in North Africa (modern Libya). A large settlement of Jews resided in North Africa at the time, and the faithful would make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the annual Passover. What accounts for anyone knowing his name (and the name of his children) a full generation later, in various locations around the Mediterranean world when the Gospels were published? The only reasonable answer is that he had become a believer, and a famous one for having assisted, even involuntarily, the dying Jesus.

This is all the more striking when compared to the end of this week's

reading. The crucifixion narrative ends with another passing character, offering a more explicit positive declaration. As Jesus dies, a Roman centurion at the foot of the cross, “glorified God, saying: ‘Certainly this man was innocent!’” While most that day mocked Jesus as he died, a few broke rank, and saw in him something noble, something true.

Day 2: Luke 23:27-31 Those who reject Jesus face terrible judgment

Simon, like the centurion, provides a hint of a small positive result from Jesus’ death in the face of a massive, catastrophic outcome. For most of Israel, and especially for the city of Jerusalem, rejection of Jesus will bring divine judgment and destruction.

Women join the procession to Jesus’ execution. Their wailing may be more a traditional Middle-Eastern response to a random execution than an expression of devotion particularly to Jesus. Otherwise, it is hard to account for the harshness of his response: “[Women}, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and your children.” The days to come will be so harsh, and the struggle for survival so severe, that having children to care for will be a burden, no longer a blessing.

As he anticipates these days, Jesus has two contrasting Old Testament precedents which he can invoke. One comes from the prophecy of Zechariah, which has already featured in the Triumphal Procession. This is a word of reassurance and hope: “They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son. On that day the weeping in Jerusalem will be great ... On that day, a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity... They will call on my name and I will answer them: I will say, ‘They are my people, and they will say, ‘The Lord is our God’” (Zechariah 12:10b-11; 13:1,9). Will his execution lead to grief, repentance, and salvation?

It is not this hopeful text he invokes, with its penitent mourning and promise of salvation. Instead, Jesus recalls the overpowering grief of the exile seven centuries earlier, which still scarred the Jewish psyche in his time. Recalling the warning of Hosea, Jesus quotes, “‘Then they will say to the mountains, ‘Cover us!’ and to the hills, ‘Fall on us!’”

Contemporary Christians and churches are understandably uncomfortable with such references to fierce judgment, and prefer instead to focus on God’s grace and forgiveness. But burying our heads in the ground does not negate the danger. Within a generation of Jesus’ execution, in 70AD, the city of Jerusalem and the nation of Israel met the bleak fate that Jesus had foretold. While the Roman army was the human force which destroyed them, behind them Jesus

finds the hand – and the judgment – of God. Two millennia later, rejection of Jesus still brings divine judgment.

Day 3: Luke 23:32-34a Judgment is not what Jesus wants for his enemies

In ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish literature, the true test of a philosopher's life was how he dies. In this case, Jesus had often taught forgiveness (Luke 6:37; 11:4; 17:3-4), and offered forgiveness on God's behalf to those who sinned (Luke 3:3; 5:20-24; 7:47-49). Now the question is, How does he respond to the injustice which kills him?

At first, he seems to respond with threats of judgment (Luke 23:27-31). But Luke quickly follows this up with Jesus' words from the cross, as familiar to us as they are remarkable: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." In so saying, he turns the preceding warning from a threat of vengeance into an invitation to repentance. If they do end up suffering judgment, it is not because Jesus called down a curse on them. Instead, even in the midst of his own suffering, at their hands no less, he appeals to God for their forgiveness.

Of course, Jesus is a compelling role model for us when we suffer injustice. But that is not the point of these verses (as though we could ever measure up to Jesus in this regard). Instead, these verses prompt us to worship him, who was – and is – so compelling in his mercy. The judgment threatened in the previous paragraph is indeed coming on those who reject him, but Jesus, like his Father before him, "takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live" (Ezek 33:11; cf. 18:23,32).

Day 4: Psalm 22 Suffering, yet righteous

"A man guilty of a capital offense is [to be] put to death and his body ... hung on a tree ... Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" (Deut 21:22-23). As Jesus hangs from the cross, this is the conclusion that many will draw: he is cursed by God. Yet the Old Testament offers another paradigm: those who suffer though righteous. As the soldiers gamble for Jesus' clothes (Luke 23:34b), that draws Luke's attention – and, if we knew the Old Testament better, it would draw ours – back to Psalm 22:18, "They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing."

The entirety of Psalm 22 provides a prophetic commentary on the crucifixion. Matthew and Mark also appeal to this psalm, though their focus is on Jesus' quotation of the first verse, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Other aspects of the psalm capture well the agony of crucifixion, and it is these which Luke apparently has in mind: "All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads... All my bones are out of joint... A band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my

bones" (Ps 22:7,14,16-17). This psalm also captures God's response to the innocent sufferer: "[God] has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help" (Ps 22:24).

Day 5: Luke 23:35-43 He does not save himself, but he does save others

The bulk of this week's text focuses on this breath-taking irony: that Jesus does not save himself, in order to save others.

Three times his tormentors mock him: "If you are the Messiah, save yourself!" *Three times* ... an alert reader recalls the special significance of that number: three is also the number of the wilderness temptations, when Satan challenges, "If you are the Son of God, [save yourself]!" (Luke 4:1-13). Jesus' public ministry ends on the same note as it begins: Will he submit to the cross, or will he save himself? Three times his tormentors mock, and, to make his humiliation complete, their status progressively decreases: first, Jewish religious leaders; then, Roman soldiers; finally, even one of the felons dying next to him.

As we now know, it is not that Jesus *cannot* save himself, but that he *will not* do so. He saves others, rather than himself. And he succeeds in that endeavor, even while being mocked for his inability to save: one of those crucified alongside him defends Jesus, and appeals to him, "Remember me whenever you enter into your kingdom." "Today," Jesus promises, "you will be with me in paradise."

Day 6: Luke 23:44-49 A righteous man!

Nature shudders at the travesty, its creator crucified: the sky grows dark, and shadows gloom. The temple shudders at the travesty, its Lamb sacrificed: the curtain tears, as God departs. Jesus dies in his Father's arms, the words of Psalm 31 on his lips: "Free me from the trap that is set for me, for you are my refuge. Into your hands I commit my spirit; redeem me, O Lord, the God of truth" (Ps 31:2,4-5). No pagan Roman soldier would recognize the text that Jesus cites, but one does recognize the virtue with which he dies: "Surely this was a righteous man." Righteous in two senses: innocent in a court of law, and vindicated – not cursed – before God.

The cross bears little immediate fruit: a violated tourist, a convicted murderer, a hated member of an occupying army. These are not much, compared to the august Jewish Sanhedrin or the powerful Roman rulers. But they are a hint of what it to come, when their verdict is cast down. Unlike every other supposed Messiah that came before or after, Jesus' death is not the end, but the beginning. No one knows that yet, but three days from now ...