

Easter - Celebrating an Execution?!

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[0 : 0 0] Well, it's quite a bizarre thing, really, if you think about it. If you step back and think about what we're doing this morning. We're gathering together, we're having a public holiday, and we're singing songs, all in order to celebrate an execution.

And a particularly unpleasant execution. Not that any execution is pleasant, but let me tell you, Roman crucifixion, if you know anything about it, is not something you would want to celebrate.

Okay, let me tell you a little bit about crucifixion. Crucifixion was a form of torture and execution that was devised by the Persians originally, although it was perfected by the Romans, who used it extensively during their reign.

Tens of thousands of people were crucified under Roman rule. History tells us that after one particular battle, 7,000 people were crucified in one day. Even though this death was really reserved for the most horrific, worst crimes, because of how bad it was.

Even the Romans, mean as they were, didn't subject all of their criminals to this kind of death. It was reserved for the worst. It was horrific. Even if we disregard the pain of the nails that are driven through hands and feet, and even if we disregard the dehydration of someone hanging in the Middle Eastern sun, exposed all day, the worst pain of crucifixion actually came from the constant pressure that would be from the body weight on the lungs, which forced the accused to keep pushing up on his feet every time he wanted to breathe, just to breathe.

[1 : 3 9] But to do that would send excruciating pain throughout his whole body at every breath, constantly. In fact, that word excruciating comes from the word crucify.

They had to invent a whole new word to describe the pain of crucifixion. But when we read the gospel accounts of Jesus' death in the Bible, there's something very surprising.

What's surprising is that they don't stress any of these gory details at all. You see, rather the goal of the writers of the gospels, their goal is, they want us to understand why this particular crucifixion was so different to any other crucifixion that had taken place.

They want us to understand why Jesus' death is not the same as any other death that had happened and why it's so significant for us, why we come together to remember it even today, all these years later.

And so as we look at Luke's account, that part of Luke's account that Penny read for us earlier, I want you to notice just a few details this morning about Jesus' death to help you, to help us all to see what was so different about it, why we come to remember it.

[2 : 4 9] And so the first thing I want you to notice, the first detail that you really can't ignore is the darkness. The darkness that we read about in verse 44.

Okay, so by this time, Jesus had been sentenced and nailed onto the cross. We pick up the story just before midday. And up until now, really, it had been a pretty ordinary crucifixion for the Roman soldiers.

This was just another day in the office. until something very strange happened at midday. Look at verse 44. It was about noon, or the sixth hour, they would have said in Jewish timekeeping.

And darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining. Okay, I just want you to put yourself there for a second.

Take yourself 2,000 years back to the Middle East, to Jerusalem. It's the middle of the day. The sun is shining. There's not a cloud in the sky. You're going about your business in the hot Middle Eastern sun.

[3 : 55] And then without warning, in an instant, it becomes like nighttime. nighttime. The sun stops shining. All right, just picture that. Imagine how you'd react.

This is an incredible event. And incredible as it is, you must know that it's an event that's not just recorded in the Bible. It's recorded in history. History outside of the Bible has recorded this event happening.

The Greek historian Thallus, who wasn't a Christian, recorded a strange extended darkness in the middle of the day in the year AD 33. And Thallus, interestingly enough, he spoke against Christianity, but he couldn't, even he couldn't deny that this event happened historically.

The Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus, who also wasn't a Christian, reported an unexpected darkness to have occurred during the reign of Tiberius Caesar, who we know ruled around the year AD 33.

You see, this was a real, recorded, historical event. This was no overcast day. It was no solar eclipse. It was complete, unexplained darkness for three hours.

[5 : 00] The sun stopped shining. It switched off. Okay, now, the sun doesn't normally do that, right? It doesn't normally switch. It might, if it was controlled by ESCOM, it might switch off randomly.

But fortunately, it's not. The sun is controlled by God. And so, when the sun suddenly switches off, this is God trying to tell us something. This is God wanting the whole world to sit up and take note and look at this death that's happening.

It means something. God wants us to know something about it. So what? What does God want us to know about the death of Jesus? What does this darkness mean? Well, to understand that, we need to find out what darkness signifies in the Bible.

And if we look in the pages of Scripture, we realize that darkness, the idea of darkness, signifies a couple of things. Firstly, darkness is used in Scripture to refer to sin or evil.

Even today, we use it in a similar way. We talk about someone's dark side. We talk about evil as darkness. And God also talks about evil in that way.

[6 : 07] And in the book of Romans, we learn how that darkness comes about in our world. The source and the cause of that darkness being in our world today, evil things that happen in our world.

And we read this in Romans 3, sorry, Romans 1, 21. For although people knew God, they neither glorified Him as God, nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Okay, that's the word that's used to describe the human heart. And we learn that darkness and sin in our world is a result of people turning away from God. The moment people turned away from God, darkness entered the human heart.

And of course, that makes sense because when you turn away from the light, naturally that results in darkness. And so, when people turn away from the God who is good and holy, naturally that results in evil and sin in our world.

But the Bible also says that we all have that darkness in our hearts. That inclination to turn away from God and His law and His will for our lives and run our lives on our own terms.

[7 : 20] Every human, you see, has something deep down inside that is in opposition to God. That's what the Bible clearly says. And if we look around in our world and we read the news headlines, we can see that that is true.

But it was when Jesus came to earth that we saw really for the first time how dark that darkness really is in how people reacted to Jesus.

You see, how people reacted to the light when it came into our world. What do we see? Well, we see the pure hatred that people had towards Jesus even though He was the most loving, caring person who had ever lived.

We see the betrayal of His closest friends. We see the whole world, Jews and Gentiles who were arch rivals come together, teaming up to give Jesus the most excruciating and most painful death that they could devise.

We see crowds of people irrationally screaming for a murderer to be released so that they could snuff out the only true light that they had ever seen. It seems crazy. It's insane how people reacted to Jesus but that was darkness coming out of human hearts in response to the light, you see.

[8 : 26] I don't know if you've ever watched the movie Lord of the Rings. the first one of the trilogy or you may have read the book but there's this scene in the movie and if you've watched the movie you'll know what I'm talking about where Bilbo, the pleasant old hobbit is talking to his nephew Frodo and Frodo has been given the ring of power that Bilbo secretly covets but he wants to get rid of it as well.

He's got this kind of battle of wills and Frodo's got this ring hanging around his neck on a chain and Bilbo and Frodo are talking he's this pleasant old man but as Frodo is changing his top Bilbo catches a glimpse of this ring and in an instant he makes an irrational grab for it and for a moment his face is transformed to a picture of pure evil just for a moment before he composes himself and apologizes and you have to kind of pause the scene to see that picture but it serves as a good illustration of the sin that the Bible describes that's inside all of us you see we try so hard to keep it hidden and be pleasant and be good people on the surface but then at the most unexpected times it'll come out out of our control won't it we'll lash out at a loved one we'll scream at some stranger on the road we'll say the most hurtful things behind someone's back and we wonder where that came from because you see there's a darkness inside each of our hearts that we can't get rid of that's bursting to come out every day and on this day when Jesus died that darkness came out of people's hearts in full force on him and he knew it he knew that's what he was heading towards the night before his death he said to his accusers the people who came to arrest him he said this is your hour when darkness reigns he knew what he was going to face the darkness of human hearts but darkness in scripture also represents something else more than human sin darkness also represents judgment one of the things we need to remember about God that people often forget about God is that God is a perfect judge who won't let people get away with their sin and opposition to him indefinitely he warns about that over and over again in scripture while he wants to give people as much chance to repent and come back to him he warns over and over in scripture that he must judge sin and that he's going to judge sin

I want you to listen to one of the many warnings one of the ancient prophecies that describes God's judgment from the prophet Amos and I want you to keep in mind that this was written over 800 years before the events at the cross listen to what Amos says in that day this is talking about when God comes in judgment in that day declares the sovereign Lord I will make the sun go down at noon and I will darken the earth in broad daylight you see Amos prophesied a day when the earth would be darkened in the middle of the day to signify God's judgment and when Jesus died on the cross 800 years later that's exactly what happened you see this was the day that Amos prophesied this was the day when God's judgment was finally coming down to earth and good timing because this is the moment when humanity is at its most evil it's the perfect time for God's judgment to fall on humans as he said it would and so you'd expect as this human darkness is directed towards God's son and God's judgment is directed down to humans you'd expect this huge cataclysmic clash and wiping out of wicked humanity but then something completely unexpected happens when the darkness lifts three hours later only one person has experienced

God's judgment Jesus why? why Jesus? why nobody else? well because that's exactly why Jesus came to earth he came to absorb darkness not only the darkness of humans that were directed against him but also the darkness of judgment that was directed against humans he hung literally suspended between heaven and earth as God absorbing all this human wickedness against him and as man absorbing all the punishment for that wickedness that should have come to us that's what Jesus was doing on the cross forsaken by men and stricken by God at that moment he was the most rejected and despised person in the universe and ironically the only way that he could do that that he could take all of that on himself the only way is because he didn't deserve any of it and that's another point that's made strongly in Luke's account of his trial and death here his complete innocence it comes over and over again in this account you see it

Pilate the Roman governor who sentenced him to crucifixion Pilate himself four times admitted that Jesus was innocent the other criminal that's hanging on the cross next to him says this man has done nothing wrong and after Jesus died we read here the centurion in charge of his execution what did he say in verse 47 he said surely this was a righteous man you see so there's no doubt that this was an innocent man going to his death and that left an impression on the centurion that's why his words are recorded in scripture for us this hardened Roman veteran who had seen thousands of deaths probably and had overseen them and was in charge of killing people he still he was impacted by this he didn't understand why he had to oversee the execution of the only man who didn't deserve to die well what that centurion needed to realize and what we need to realize this morning is that that's the whole point

[14 : 29] Jesus needed to be innocent he needed to be sin free in order to take on the sin of others and because he was the only sinless human being who ever lived and he was divine he was the son of God because of that alone he is the only person who is capable of taking on the sin of others and that's what he did and he did it willingly but why with all due respect that didn't fix the world did it I mean we look around human wickedness is still here what did his death actually achieve well that's the third thing I want us to see that Luke highlights in this account and that is access access have a look at verse 45 again just after the wrath of God falls on Jesus and this darkness comes down look at what happens on the other side of the city

Luke suddenly jumps to an event that happens on the other side of Jerusalem the curtain of the temple was torn in two now the curtain in the temple you've got to understand it's in the temple complex in the middle of the temple complex the main temple there's this giant curtain inside and it's a thick heavy thing it's the thickness of the span of a man's hand it was recorded the thickness of that curtain and it was huge and it went right from the top of the temple to the bottom and the purpose of this curtain was to separate people from the most holy place it symbolized the separation between man and God and that was the purpose of this curtain okay it was a symbol of our separation because of our sin it was there to remind people when they came to the temple every day it was to remind them that they're separate from

God that they can't access God but suddenly this curtain the symbol of that separation when Jesus died suddenly this was supernaturally torn and we're told from top to bottom it was torn by the hand of God himself why now why did he do this because at that moment Jesus was absorbing on himself the very thing that separates you from God so that for the first time in history access to God is now possible because of what Jesus did on the cross and then the moment that happened Luke takes us back to the other side of the city back to the cross the moment that that curtain tore into what's the very next thing that happened Jesus called out with a loud voice father into your hands I commit my spirit when he had said this he breathed his last it was done Jesus had achieved what he had come to earth to achieve what he had been born to achieve because you see Jesus didn't come to fix this world temporarily by healing a few people and being a good teacher no he came to give you and me access to God by going to the cross and taking your darkness on himself and that's why good friday is called good that's why we celebrate an execution and that's why you can't afford to ignore what happened on the day that the sun switched off because it happened for you but now what matters is how you respond to that what you do about that and so before we finish

I want to look at some of the responses that we see in this account that Luke records for us the first response we see is the crowds the crowds verse 28 when the people who had gathered to witness the sight saw what took place they beat their breasts and went away okay so these people are sad because Jesus died they beat their breast as a sign of remorse maybe they regret what they'd done and the part they had played in his trial and his execution maybe they realized at that moment like the centurion the innocence of Jesus and when they see the innocence of Jesus they realize their own guilt but I want you to see what they do about it what do they do about it they just go home you know they know this is wrong they know this is significant they feel bad about it but then they just walk away and go home and carry on in their lives well I'm sure you don't like the fact that Jesus died an innocent man and a cruel death nobody likes that and maybe like these people you know all is not right in your heart that there's darkness there but I want to ask you what are you going to do about it are you just going to go home later after the service and nothing is going to come of it like those crowds or maybe you're like the friends in verse 49 have a look but all those who knew him stood at a distance watching these things and so

Jesus friends the people who knew Jesus the people who had walked with Jesus and lived with Jesus they watch they just watch silently withdrawn in the background they don't want to be associated with Jesus and we saw Jesus' closest friend Peter already denied him three times they don't want to be associated with this man on the cross and the danger that will come from that and the sacrifices they'll need to make if people associate them with Jesus but they don't walk away either they're different to the crowds they stay there and they watch and they watch they don't really know what to do maybe that's you this morning maybe you've been considering Jesus for a long time maybe you've been coming to church maybe you've got a history of going to church for years but you know that you've been watching from a distance all that time not really getting involved not really sticking your neck out for Jesus because you're worried what people might think or you're worried what changes you're going to have to make in your life if you really take Jesus seriously is that you well then

[20 : 59] Luke shows us one more response to what happened on the cross from verse 50 have a look now there was a man named Joseph a member of the council a good and upright man who had not consented to their decision and action he came from the Judean town of Arimathea and he himself was waiting for the kingdom of God going to Pilate he asked for Jesus body then he took it down wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock one in which no one had yet been laid okay so I want you to meet Joseph of Arimathea he's a high ranking member of the Jewish council the very council that conspired to have Jesus killed but Joseph is different to him he recognizes who Jesus is and so what does he do he does something about it he doesn't go home he doesn't stand and watch he does something he takes a huge risk and publicly associates himself with

Jesus this fugitive who's now dead and he gives up an expensive new tomb and throws in his lot with Jesus come what may now why would he do that Jesus is dead why would he risk everything risk his reputation risk his assets be confiscated just to associate with Jesus well because we're told Joseph is looking forward to the kingdom of God you see he sees his life in light of a much bigger picture Joseph knows that his life on this planet is not the end and he's looking forward to a new life in eternity with God the life that he knows he was made to live and the life that you and I were made to live we weren't made to just live 70 or 80 years on this planet in pain and suffering and eventually expire we were made to live eternal life that God made us for in perfect relationship with him and Joseph knew that that's what he was made for and he also knew that the only way that he can have that life is because of what

Jesus just did on the cross for him to take his sins away and give him access to God and so what does he do he throws his lot in with Jesus with this dead man essentially he dies to what he valued before and puts Jesus first come what may and what we'll see this Sunday is that Joseph isn't disappointed because Jesus doesn't stay dead but come back on Sunday for that but you see of all the responses we see in the story this is the only right response to the death of Jesus if you understand it to put Jesus first in your life to tie yourself to him come what may and that means to become a Christian but in the true sense of the word not just observing from a distance because make no mistake unless you do that unless you tie yourself to Jesus and put your faith and trust in him and follow him as your Lord and Savior then there is no access to

God and there is no cure for your darkness other than through the only person who was qualified to take it for you and that's why Jesus said these words to his disciples before he died he said whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me for whoever wants to save their life will lose it but whoever loses their life for me and the gospel will save it well how will you respond to the cross this morning will you go home and nothing will come of it will you watch from a distance or like Joseph will you tie yourself to Jesus Christ in trust and follow him well perhaps you've never had an opportunity to respond to the cross maybe you've never had time to think about it well this is the perfect opportunity I want to give you an opportunity right now this morning to respond to what

Jesus did because let's not waste any time you know life is short tomorrow isn't a guarantee we've all got to respond before it's too late and so if you haven't yet had a chance to respond then take this moment to do that I'm going to pray a prayer and I want to invite you to pray that prayer line by line as I pray it in your hearts to God as you respond to what you've seen and heard this morning let's pray dear father father god my creator I confess that I've sinned against you my heart is filled with darkness but I know Jesus came to take that darkness away I put my trust in him now and I turn from my sins help me to follow Jesus into eternal life amen so

[26 : 19] Thank you.