

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH



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“Divine Forgiveness”

Luke 23:33-43

Rev. David Roones

It seems odd to be reading about the death of Jesus at this time of the year! We normally associate the Passion of Christ with Holy Week and Easter. The crucifixion happened near the **end** of our Lord’s earthly ministry. Yet, next Sunday marks the start of Advent, which sets the stage for Christmas. We associate these seasons with the **birth** of Jesus, NOT his death! Yet, a careful reading of this text shows that Dr. Luke has consciously linked the birth of Jesus with his Passion and resurrection. There were several groups of bystanders who witnessed the crucifixion, and Luke shows that each misunderstood who Jesus was. Each group failed to understand why the cross was necessary for our redemption.

The Jewish leaders made up one such group of bystanders. Verse 35 of our text states that they mocked Jesus, saying, “He **saved** others; let him **save himself** IF he is the **Messiah** of God.” One of the criminals who hung next to Jesus also mocked him, yelling, “Are you not the **Messiah? Save yourself AND US!**” Luke introduced these themes in ch.1, where Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, exclaims, “(God) has raised up a **mighty savior** for us in the house of his servant David.” We all know that an angel appeared to the shepherds who were camped in the fields near Bethlehem, saying, “To you is born this day in the city of David a **Savior**, who is the **Messiah**, the Lord.” In Luke ch.2 we meet Simeon, a devout old man who had been promised that “he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s **Messiah**.” In 2:29f Simeon sees

the baby Jesus and shouts, ‘Let your servant die in peace, for my eyes have seen your **salvation!**’ Well, the scribes and Pharisees did not believe that Jesus could save them, because they thought that salvation came through strict obedience to the Law of Moses and the teachings of the elders! Indeed, in their view, Jesus was a **law-breaker**, and it states in Dt.21:22f, “When someone is convicted of a crime and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, you shall bury him that same day, **for anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse.**”

The Roman soldiers were a second group who misunderstood Jesus. They nailed a sign to the cross which read, “This is the **King** of the Jews.” In vs.36 of our text,

the soldiers also mock Jesus, taunting, "IF you are the **King** of the Jews, **save yourself!**" The repentant thief who was crucified next to Jesus seems to have believed that he **was** a king, for he pleads, "Jesus, remember me **when you come into your kingdom.**" Back in Luke 1:31ff the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and said, "You will conceive and bear a son, and the Lord God will give to him the **throne of his ancestor David.** He will **reign** over the house of Jacob **forever**, and of his **kingdom** there will be **no end.**" Well, the Roman soldiers could scarcely believe that Jesus was a KING, when he had never sat upon a throne, never commanded an army, and never received taxes in tribute! CAESAR was **their** king; Jesus was a pathetic pretender cut down in the prime of life!

The common people made up a third group who misunderstood Jesus. In our text, vs.35, we are told that "the people stood by, watching." Later in this chapter, after Jesus dies, we read that the crowds "returned home, beating their breasts." Matthew's Gospel adds an important detail. It claims that some in the crowd thought that Jesus called out to the prophet Elijah. You

may recall that Elijah did not die; instead a chariot came down and carried him off to heaven-see

2 Kings ch.2. That is the source of the Negro Spiritual, "*Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.*" Perhaps the bystanders hoped that God would rescue Jesus from the cross in such a miraculous manner?! If so, their hopes were shattered, because Jesus took his last breath while they watched in silence!

It seems to me that Luke has raised one issue in three slightly different ways. To put the question one way: "How can God **save** the human race, when some people refuse to admit their need for grace, and even put their Savior to death?!" To put the issue in a different way: "How can God's **Kingdom**, - God's reign, God's sovereignty, - be established on earth when many misunderstand God's will, and some actually oppose it?!" To state the matter a third way: "Does it matter that God's **Spirit** was poured into Jesus of Nazareth?" Remember that "Messiah" is the English pronunciation of the Hebrew "Meshiach," meaning "ANNOINTED ONE." "Christ" is the English pronunciation of the Greek title "CHRISTOS" used in the New Testament, which also means "ANNOINTED ONE." Can God hope to change human destiny, when many have closed their hearts and minds to the moving of the Holy Spirit? In short, Luke is asking if the Incarnation of God in Christ will have any lasting effect!

I believe that the Evangelist has suggested an answer to his own question. The high and the mighty, the self-righteous and the self-sufficient, have no need of a Savior! They are too proud to submit to God's will! Their hearts remain closed to the Holy Spirit, shut to the possibility of repentance and rebirth! But those who admit that they are sinners are drawn to God by the offer of salvation! Jesus is a kindred spirit to all who are poor, weak, vulnerable, powerless, despised! In humility, such people are open to God's Spirit and eager to submit to God in gratitude and faith!

Luke emphasizes this point by stressing the role of forgiveness in the Passion narrative. "Father, forgive them" begs Jesus in verse 34 of our text. The Greek literally reads that Jesus **continually** prayer, "Father, forgive them; Father, forgive them; Father, forgive them." The penitent thief begged, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus gave him **immediate** hope: "TODAY you will be with me in Paradise." God's mercy extends even to a condemned criminal in the final minutes of his earthly life! Does this surprise us, when Jesus said, "The Son of man came to SEEK and TO SAVE THE LOST"- Luke 19:10?!

How shall we respond to the undeserved love shown to us on the cross? I've already said that our first response should be that of **faith**. When we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we are admitting that God has done what we cannot do, no matter how many self-help books we may read, no matter how many 12-step programs we attend! GOD HAS TREATED US AS IF WE ARE WHOLE! Not that any of us can achieve perfection this side of heaven! No! But God does not let our sin keep us from relating to our Creator, our neighbor, and our true self! A few weeks ago, Rev. Henry Millan quoted a vital truth from the Bible: 'NOTHING in ALL OF CREATION can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'- see Rom.8:38f! **FAITH** is our grateful response to God's life-giving forgiveness!

Another response should be our willingness to forgive others. In Luke's version of the

Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, for (God) is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. BE MERCIFUL, just as your Father is merciful"- Luke 6:35f. Jesus adds, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. FORGIVE, AND YOU WILL BE FORGIVEN." In Luke 17:3f

Jesus commands, "If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you MUST forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and

turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' YOU MUST FORGIVE." In Eph.4:31f,

St. Paul wrote, "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, FORGIVING ONE ANOTHER AS GOD IN CHRIST HAS FORGIVEN YOU." Recall that Dr. Luke also wrote the book of Acts. In Acts ch.7, we hear about Stephen, a deacon in the Jerusalem church, who was murdered by a Jewish mob. With his dying breath, Stephen prayed, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them"- echoing the words of Jesus on the cross.

The Amish who live in Pennsylvania are people who try to obey the teachings of Jesus. Last month, they marked the first anniversary of the murder of five of their children. The CBS Evening News reported that the father of one of the victims was asked how he could possibly forgive the man who took the life of his daughter. He replied, "I realized that the first step would be to let go of my need for revenge." So often, when we are hurt, we want to GET EVEN with the one who wronged us! Forgiveness does NOT mean that we deny the reality of pain, or ignore injustice. Forgiveness DOES mean that we refuse to let the past cloud the present and control the future. That is how a loving God treats us. May we accept God's gift of love, and forgive, as we have been forgiven! Amen!