

Crossroad 7—From Pilate to Golgotha

Luke 23:26-31

Maundy Thursday

The most famous crossroad our Savior traveled has been dubbed the *Via Dolorosa*—the Way of Sorrows. It’s a half-mile walk, the last steps our Savior took before he died. On this day each year, thousands of tourists walk this road in Jerusalem, which has been divided into 14 stations, many of which commemorate events for which there is no proof. For example, tourists kiss dented stones that supposedly mark spots where Jesus fell with the cross. The sixth station reveres a woman named Veronica who supposedly wiped Jesus’ bloody face. Another station pays tribute to Mary, who met Jesus on the way. How unfortunate that Satan has cunningly converted this crossroad into a tourist trap and shrine that is worshiped by many as much as the man who walked it.

Tonight we walk this crossroad. Not to worship it. Not to speculate about events that may or may not have happened. Rather, we walk it through the pages of Scripture and see two events that did occur. One involved a Simon and another involved a sermon. Both events are worthy of our study as we walk with Jesus on the crossroad from Pilate to Golgotha.

I. A Simon

The walk started out at about 8:30 A.M. Already on this Friday, Jesus had been shuffled from ruler to ruler. He’d been beaten by various mobs of soldiers. He’d been passed over in favor of the region’s worst criminal, Barabbas. And now, guilty of the crime of being the King of the Jews, Jesus begins the walk to his death with a heavy beam on his back and a large crowd looking on.

As this large crowd paraded out of the city, other travelers were heading into the city to celebrate the Passover, one of whom was a man named Simon. Simon had traveled a long way to be there. He was from Cyrene, modern Libya, west of Egypt, a trek of over 800 miles. Whether it was a round-trip specifically for this festival or a long-term move to the area, Simon had traveled quite a distance. We think it’s out of this world to drive 20 minutes in our plush-seated cars to worship. This man had traveled weeks by foot or by animal to make it to Jerusalem. What joy and relief must have been in his heart as he approached Jerusalem, which the psalmist describes as being “beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth” (Ps 48:2).

Abruptly, his joy was interrupted. As he was heading into the beloved city, some Roman soldiers heading the opposite direction seized him and forced him to assist a tired criminal carrying his cross. Imagine Simon’s disappointment. He’d come all this way. He had sacrifices to buy, meals to prepare, and a money-changer to visit to get the proper currency to pay his Passover tax. And now he was forced to help a bloody criminal carry a cross?! How humiliating! Even to touch the cross, an accursed instrument of death, was repulsive to a Jew. Worst of all, the association with blood and death may have made Simon ceremonially unclean for the Passover, thus unable to participate in the festivities. In other words, his 800-mile trek was for naught. Imagine that. Imagine walking from Milwaukee to Atlanta to see the Brewers play the Braves and the game is rained out and you have to walk back home. We would be peeved. And it’s likely, so was Simon.

Simon is often exalted as this great crossbearer, the ultimate example of one following Jesus’ words, “Take up your cross daily and follow me” (Lk 9:23). But does that really apply here? Jesus spoke those words to describe the trials we endure because of our faith. To say that’s what Simon was doing here may be a stretch. Simon wasn’t bearing a cross because of his faith. He was forced to carry a beam of wood because a brute soldier didn’t want to wait for this worn-out criminal.

But don't let me ruin Simon's reputation for you. There is something in this lesson that we can admire about him, and it's only the gospel writer Mark who mentions it. Mark describes this traveler as, "*Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus*" (15:21). The casual mention of his sons' names indicates that the readers of this gospel knew who they were. In other words, his sons were well-known Christians, and it's likely that Simon was the one who told them about Christ. And perhaps it was this crossroad that God used to introduce Simon to his Savior. Isn't that how God often works? During the roughest, most disappointing times, God brings us closer to him. At first, this was the worst of days for Simon. In the end, it may have been the best.

Just how did Simon realize that this man he was helping was his Savior? Perhaps he stayed a few more hours at Golgotha and was convinced by what he saw and heard that this Jesus was the Son of God. Or maybe Simon was convinced of his Savior's identity before he reached the place of the skull. Maybe he was convinced by the other event that happened on this crossroad from Pilate to Golgotha, namely,

II. A Sermon

Our lesson says, "*A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wept for him. Jesus turned and said to them, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then 'they will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!'' For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?''*"

What amazing words! At the lowest point of his life, Jesus said, "Do not weep for me." These women felt sorry for Jesus. They grimaced at his gruesome appearance, thinking, "This isn't right. No one should suffer so much." But Jesus said, "I don't want or need your pity. Don't feel sorry for me. Rather, worry about yourselves." And he went on with an illustration, "I'm like a live tree: fruitful, growing, and worth something. And look how I'm being treated. If this is how these enemies treat a live tree, how do you think they'll treat the rest of you, who are like dried-up twigs?" In other words, things were not going to be pretty for Jerusalem. Forty years later, Jesus' words were fulfilled. During the Passover in 70 A.D., the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem, trapping all the Passover visitors inside. Historians report that the siege lasted 143 days. With the food supplies cut, the Jews resorted to cannibalism. Then 30,000 Roman troops stormed the city and destroyed everything, including the temple. The Jewish historian Josephus reported that hundreds of thousands of Jews were slaughtered. As prophesied earlier by Jesus, not one stone was left unturned.

Why was this the topic of Jesus' sermon on this crossroad? Yes, he was warning the people of what would happen, but he was also sounding a call to repentance. He wanted these women and all other onlookers to step back and see the big picture. Instead of crying about the miserable condition of a beat-up man stumbling to his execution, he wanted them to peer in their own hearts and see an even worse condition—the mangled mess sin had left. If they would do that, then they would understand why Jesus had to walk this crossroad, not as a criminal but as a Savior. Then they would understand that their sins had placed him on this crossroad.

And it was not only to the daughters of Jerusalem that Jesus spoke. This crossroad sermon is preserved in Scripture for you and for me. During the six solemn weeks of Lent, it is so easy for us to look with pity on Jesus. We feel for him when we hear how he was dressed up in a shiny robe and ridiculed. Our hearts pain when we imagine the bone-tipped whip eating the flesh off his back.

We cringe when we consider a crown of thorns being pressed into his skull. But if these Lenten journeys down these crossroads do no more than arouse our sympathy for the suffering Savior in Gethsemane, if they do no more than make us weep over the agony caused by rusty nails driven through his hands that healed so many, if these midweek journeys do no more than fill us with anger toward the self-righteous Sanhedrin, then this series has failed. These journeys are not meant to conjure up the emotion, “I feel sorry for Jesus.” Rather, “I feel sorry for my sins, which did this to Jesus.”

To illustrate, imagine living in a place where every time you would make a mistake, a band of unsympathetic soldiers would come in and beat up your loved one who is tied to a chair in the middle of the room. Every slip of the tongue, every selfish thought, every misplaced priority would bring another bloody welt to your loved one’s body. And this doesn’t go on for a day, a week, or a month. It goes on for years, and you get to witness every blow delivered. Now after 30 years of your loved one being beaten because of your actions, you have a chance to speak to him or her. What would you say? I’m sure the first words would be, “I’m sorry. Not just sorry for you, but sorry for what I did to you.” With tears streaming down your cheeks, you would say, “Can you ever forgive me?”

That’s the heartfelt emotion Jesus is seeking on this crossroad from Pilate to Golgotha. That’s the emotion all the crossroads are meant to elicit. Scripture does not record the details of Jesus’ suffering and death so that we can say, “I’m sorry for you, Jesus.” But rather, “Jesus, I’m sorry for what I’ve done to put you through that. I’m sorry that I treated you so poorly. I’m sorry that I used your name to curse my fellowman. I’m sorry that I treated worship like some kind of burden I had to endure. I’m sorry that I acted like my friends, my money, and my free time are all more important than you are. I’m sorry that by my actions, I have put you through hell. Lord, please, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

That’s also the emotion our Savior wanted to work in our hearts as we confessed our sins earlier in the service. That’s the emotion our Savior wants to work in us by telling us to examine ourselves before we commune at his table on this Maundy Thursday. God wants us to realize that our sins caused Jesus to shed his blood.

But then God also wants us to realize something else. He wants us to know that he heard our prayer. He has had mercy on us. God’s Word, which crushes our hearts by leading us to admit that our sins put Jesus on the cross, also comforts us by assuring those sins were paid for on the cross. The same God who says, “Your sins put Jesus there,” now says, “Your sins are forgiven.” This same Jesus who on this Maundy Thursday says, “This is my blood which was shed,” adds the words, “For you, for the forgiveness of your sins.”

How awesome! That’s why God invites us to examine ourselves and repent of our sins. It’s not because he wants us to feel guilty for our sins. Rather, he wants us to know and appreciate all the more that we’re forgiven for those sins. They’re paid in full. Our Savior, who walked the crossroad from Pilate to Golgotha, has erased them all. And he no longer holds anything against us. Amen.