

Communion

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Date: 13 November 2011

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[0 : 00] Please turn back to the passage of Scripture we read in the Gospel of Luke, Luke 23.

We're going to look at essentially verses 33 to 46, that whole narrative of the cross. I'll read again, 33.

When they came to the place called the skull, there they crucified Him along with the criminals. Amen.

Today we gather in a special way to remember that Jesus gave Himself for our sins. And we remember that He did that in this world at a particular place and point in history.

The Son of God who had become incarnate in this world died on a real cross in space-time history, His blood running down the wood of that tree.

[1 : 26] Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate. We emphasize that it happened in this world.

But we mustn't think that it was just an event in this world. Many people will believe that Jesus lived and died and that that really happened somewhere, sometime.

But I want us to think today of this cross in a rather broader perspective. To think of the cross on earth as what I'll call heaven's cross.

But all that happens in the ministry of Jesus is happening under heaven. Heaven taking a tremendous interest in this transaction because heaven has sent Jesus and He will return there. And all that He does at Calvary has meaning in the light of heaven's purpose for Him and for us. I won't take too much time to run over that theme in the Gospel of Luke, but just to remind you of it from beginning and end of the Gospel.

[2 : 51] It's not long till Christmas. I have students who tell me how many sleeps there are till Christmas.

So, some girls in St. Andrews are already getting very excited about this. So, it's not long to go till Christmas when we remember the birth of Jesus and we read the Nativity stories again.

And in the Gospel of Luke, you remember that that's clearly something that happens in the light of heaven as angels come from heaven.

And remember in chapter 2, the multitude of the heavenly host praising God and singing. Last night, you remember we looked at the baptism of Jesus, among other things.

And heaven is opened and a voice comes from heaven and a spirit descends from heaven. Or right at the heart of the story, you might think of an event like the Transfiguration, where there are visitors from heaven who show the interest of heaven in what Jesus is doing on earth.

[4 : 05] And then there's a cloud and a voice from the cloud, the voice of the Father speaking about his Son's work. And then right through to the very end of the Gospel, how does Luke finish?

While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshipped him. The story takes Jesus from heaven.

And Jesus returns to heaven. And the cross at the heart of that story must be seen in the light of heaven. Well, let me take you through the story with that in mind and try and hit five things.

First of all, I want you to see prayer to heaven. We'll find Jesus in verse 34 saying, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.

Jesus prays as he taught us to pray to his Father in heaven. Now, this is the first, as you know, of the seven sayings from the cross.

[5 : 23] And here is Jesus in this first saying, reminding us of what perhaps I mentioned last night, how important his prayer life is as a man in this world.

It's the Gospel of Luke that says most about the prayers of Jesus. It doesn't give us a long prayer of Jesus, as, for example, John does in John 17.

That's a Gospel that lets us into one big prayer of Jesus. But Luke, from beginning to end of Jesus' ministry, keeps referring to the fact that Jesus prays.

And here he is at the very end of his ministry, as he's about to die on the cross. He is still praying to his Father.

And it's a prayer of tremendous love, isn't it? This is what took Jesus from heaven. Love took him to this world. The love of the Father sent him.

[6 : 25] And his own love brought him and kept him here. There's a sense in which Jesus is nailed to the cross by love. That's what keeps him there. And so, in love, he prays for those who are hammering nails into him.

Many people believe that that's actually when he did pray this prayer, as the cross is laid on the ground, and the person to be crucified was laid on top of the cross, and nails are hammered into hands and feet.

That was the point at which Roman soldiers were used invariably to have people curse them, spit in their face, blaspheme heaven.

And here, perhaps uniquely in their experience, somebody prays that they might be forgiven for what they're doing.

If that's true, it makes the thing even more poignant, that Jesus, as these men are doing this to him, simply wants them to be absolved of this crime and this sin.

[7 : 44] He is dying for the guilty. He says on the cross of them as he says of us, Father, forgive them and condemn me.

So we have this beautiful prayer, this prayer of love, as Jesus asks the Father to forgive these men. It reminds us of the love of Jesus, but it also challenges us, doesn't it, about our own readiness to let things go.

If Jesus was willing to forgive in this kind of way, and if he calls us to forgive even our enemies, then we need to learn from Jesus how to let stuff go and be able to move on forgiving others.

Jesus has forgiven us so much. Can we not forgive each other? So, a prayer to heaven. And secondly, I want you to see a promise of heaven.

The promise is in verse 43. At the end of this next little section of the story where Jesus has been dealing with the two criminals crucified with him, Jesus answered one of them, I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.

[9 : 15] Paradise as a specific reference, I believe, to heaven. Now, Jesus on the cross is, as you can see from the story, surrounded by people who mock him.

Verse 35, even the rulers are sneering at him and making fun of him in his distress and pain.

In verse 39, we read that one of the criminals hurled insults at him. We learn from one of the other gospels that actually both criminals began their time on the cross by hurling insults at Jesus.

One of them keeps that up, but the other one, the one we read about here, turns in repentance and recognizes his sin.

Now, we don't know what changed this mocker into a believer, except that we know, of course, it was God's work in his heart.

[10 : 25] We don't know specifically what the move might have been, maybe what the trigger might have been. Perhaps it was that first word from the cross as he began to think about what Jesus had said and was saying, maybe that began to work in his mind.

Maybe there was something said by Jesus to him that we don't know about. Maybe it was just the sheer bearing of Jesus as he suffered what he was.

But I think there's one hint in the story here of what might have been going on. In verse 40, he rebukes his friend and he says, don't you fear God?

Maybe there's something of the fear of God working in his heart. He recognizes that he is guilty. He's come to believe that Jesus is innocent.

And he's simply saying to his friend, isn't this ridiculous? I mean, we've spent our lives together. Perhaps they were in league together as thieves, brigands, whatever they were.

[11 : 40] And he says, we've been trying to be so tough all these years. And here we are, going to go into whatever lies beyond death in an hour or two.

And we're still trying to be so tough. We're still trying to keep up this image to the very end as if we're such great people. He seems to be beginning to think about how dumb his life has been and how ridiculous it is to keep up this, you know, macho image on the cross.

And he's beginning to think about death and what might lie beyond. And will he have to face God in a few hours?

So he says, don't you fear God? And he's come to an awareness of his own sin, as I said, also of the innocence of Jesus. And he turns to Jesus in a prayer.

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And when you think about it, didn't God give this man an amazing insight and faith?

[12:55] I mean, if you had been a passerby and didn't know much about what was going on, and you had looked up and seen a dying man on a cross trying to turn his head towards another dying man on another cross and saying, remember me when you're king, you would have assumed that the man who's saying this is clearly, his mind is clearly gone in some way.

And he doesn't really know what he's saying. But he knew exactly what he was saying. And Jesus knows that this man has come to faith in him.

And Jesus responds by actually, in a sense, I think, saying more to the man than the man could have hoped for. We don't know what the man thought about what the kingdom might be and when the kingdom might come.

And Jesus is saying to him, today, you will be with me in paradise. He is saying to him, the moment you die, you will transition into paradise.

And he's saying to him that that is for him whatever he's done. And even though he's left this prayer to the last minute, the moment he dies, he will wake up in paradise.

[14:27] That's true for everybody who falls asleep in Jesus. Everyone who trusts in Jesus wakes up in heaven, I believe. Conscious enjoyment of the presence of the Lord in a place called heaven.

So Jesus gives this man tremendous encouragement. And this man's story, of course, has been such a huge encouragement to others over the years.

That whoever you are, wherever you've been, whatever you've done, and however simple and untheological your prayer, all you need to do is say to Jesus, remember me, and Jesus will remember you.

I think it's the most beautiful prayer, most amazing moment. I think of it here as we are going to go to the Lord's table in a little while, how all of us who trust in Jesus should be there.

If somebody says to Jesus, remember me, he remembers him. Well, remember in the gospel, Jesus also says to us, do this in remembrance of me.

[15:48] If Jesus is willing to remember me, should I not remember him? That's what the table is for, to remember the Jesus who has remembered me.

Promise of heaven. Thirdly, I want you to see judgment from heaven. Judgment from heaven. Here we come to verse 44 as the story moves on.

It's now about the sixth hour, 12 noon, and darkness comes over the whole land until the ninth hour. Jesus on the cross from nine in the morning, dies at three in the afternoon, and here at the midpoint, when the sun should be at its brightest and its hottest, suddenly it seems as if the sun isn't shining anymore.

The whole land goes completely dark. It's as if midnight has suddenly descended at high noon. Now, this is a miraculous darkness.

There is no other explanation for it. People talk about a sudden desert storm. They had them. They might last for a day or two or even three days.

[17:10] But the world just became gloomy for a while. And they built up and then they died away slowly. This is something totally different. Suddenly at 12 noon, it goes absolutely pitch black for no clear reason to people around until presumably the darkness lifts at three o'clock.

And so this is a miraculous darkness, but a darkness that has a message. It's God preaching through the darkness, symbolically saying something about his sun and what's happening here.

Now, I don't know what you think the darkness might mean. Any of you might have a better idea of what it means than I have because there are so many ideas canvassed about it.

I don't have time to go go through them all. I came across the other day somebody quoting Spurgeon saying something about the darkness as telling us to be careful as we approach Calvary, that much of the cross lies in impenetrable darkness.

So Spurgeon, at one level at least, is saying the darkness is calling us to be reverent about the mysteries of Calvary and what was going on there.

[18:37] So maybe that should make some of us pause about having too many theories about what the darkness is saying. Others have gone to all kinds of places in Scripture for explanations of the darkness.

I came across somebody recently going to the covenant ceremony. It's in Genesis 15 of Abram and that horror of darkness that comes down.

Others have gone further back to the creation story and darkness there and darkness to light and here is recreation happening. Others have gone to think about evil powers around the cross. This is your hour and the hour of darkness and also related it to outer darkness and a hell experience for Jesus. I may come back to that theme in a minute or two.

Some have related it to the loneliness of Jesus. Where in other Gospels he cries, why have you forsaken me? He's alone in this horrific darkness he feels.

[19:44] Others have said darkness is a symbol of death as light is a symbol of life. It's simply saying here is a place of death.

But I've my own particular favorite theory about the darkness and I want to share it with you. It's in the light of that idea of judgment.

And I say it because it seems to me that the great symbolism of darkness in the Old Testament that would link it with the cross is especially this idea of judgment and judgment visited by the God of heaven judging her.

Say for a couple of reasons. One is to associate what's happening here with the Exodus. If you go back to the Transfiguration just in passing you perhaps know that when Moses and Elijah came to talk with Jesus they talked about literally his Exodus which he would accomplish at Jerusalem. There's an Exodus theme running through the ministry of Jesus and for Luke the Exodus as he especially focused on his death. Well if you remember the plagues the penultimate plague is a plague of darkness.

[21:12] In Exodus 10 we read there was thick darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days.

And if you read that in the Old Testament and then read the way that Luke puts it here it sounds very very similar. In one case there's darkness over a land for three days.

In this case there's darkness over another land for three hours. And that was a darkness of judgment.

The penultimate plague remember before the final plague of the death of the firstborn. So how is that fulfilled here?

It's fulfilled because the plague of darkness comes down on another firstborn. So that we might not have to endure the darkness.

[22:16] The firstborn of God endures the judgment in our place. darkness. The other place to go on judgment and darkness is the prophetic literature of the Old Testament.

And the way in which again and again darkness is associated with something called the day of the Lord. People were taught about a coming day of the Lord and for some people that would be a day of judgment.

judgment. And it was always associated with darkness, gloom, night, that kind of imagery. The judgment was associated with darkness.

I don't have time to take you through many of the passages so I think I'll just read one which maybe makes the point. In Amos chapter 8 verse 9 talking about the day of the Lord, 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.

I will make that time like morning for an only sun and the end of it like a bitter day. So here is the day of the Lord.

[23:44] Jesus taking the judgment that we deserve on the day of the Lord. Let me say to you, if you trust in Jesus, then you do not need to fear the day of the Lord that will come in one final way in the future because for you, the judgment part of that day has already been taken by Jesus on the cross.

So you do not need to be afraid of the return of the Lord. For some it will be a day of darkness and judgment, but for you it will be a day when your Savior says, welcome, because he took the judgment of that day on the cross for your sins.

I believe indeed that he experienced outer darkness, hell on the cross as he took the judgment of heaven against your sins and my sins.

So we today, as we gather at the table, should be so grateful to Jesus that he was willing to take my night, my darkness, my judgment, so that because of his substitution for me, I might go one day to a place that is light, a place where, remember, there is no night there.

Judgment from heaven. Then fourthly, access to heaven. Access to heaven. Let me just touch on this one.

[25 : 31] Here we're in verse 45, the second part of it, and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. I believe this is a reference to the curtain between the holy and most holy places, the veil that curtained off the holy of holies.

It's ripped in two from top to bottom. I'm taking the story here just as Luke tells it, though what Luke is doing in verses 44 and 45 is taking this particular thing out of chronological sequence.

He mentions the two miraculous events together to put them together deliberately, the darkness and the torn curtain. These are both so important to him that he just mentions them together, the two signs, and then he goes back to refer to Jesus' last words.

So I'll just take them in Luke's order, and here as Jesus dies, the curtain of the temple is torn in two. Now, without going into it in any detail, I just want to say that I think this is a reference to access to heaven.

For Jewish people, the holy of holies said something about heaven on earth, and to have access to that place was to have access to the God of heaven, and there were cherubim, remember, embroidered in these curtains, because this was speaking of heaven coming down to earth.

[27 : 05] So for that curtain to be torn, symbolically, is saying something about the God of heaven, and in terms of the death of Jesus, and especially the way that Hebrews develops this whole theology, it's speaking about access to the God of heaven, at last access to heaven itself.

Remember the way that Hebrews talks about Jesus going through the heavens, the end of chapter four, the imagery there is of Jesus going, as it were, through the veil into the holy of holies above. Remember later in Hebrews in chapter 10, we're told that we have confidence to enter the holy of holies by the blood of Jesus. Because Jesus died, we have access to the holy of holies, and the true holy of holies is in heaven.

So the fact that this happens as Jesus dies is saying that his death is the great sacrifice that tears the veil once and for all and forever.

It's torn from top to bottom by the God of heaven. And it speaks to us of the access that we have through the blood of Jesus. Whoever we are, if we trust in Jesus, we have 24-7 access into the holiest of all, because Jesus died for our sins and Jesus is now our great high priest.

[28 : 34] It's the most marvelous thing, the way being opened for anyone and everyone to come to the God of heaven and open by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But I need to move on to the fifth thing, which is what I'll call the peace of heaven. Come now to verse 46 and the final saying.

Again, the address is, Abba, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. Then Jesus breathes his last. He is committing his human spirit into the safe keeping of his Father in heaven.

His body will go to the grave. His spirit will be cared for by the Father. But I want you especially to note and why I use the word peace and I apologize if I've said this before in this place because it's something I return to again and again and I forget where I've said it.

But I think the reference may be clear to you why I'm talking about peace. If I explain that into your hands I commit my spirit, which you know comes from Psalm 31 and verse 5.

[29 : 52] was often we're told used by Jewish moms to teach a little child their first prayer. Like any of you do when you have a little child you want to begin to teach them to pray.

And you maybe teach them first of all a nighttime prayer and you want just a few words that they're able to say. Well, Jewish moms did this with this one from the Psalms and maybe Mary taught Jesus when he was a little boy to say at night, into your hands I commit my spirit.

And if you want to get the flavor of what that means, think of a longer prayer that many of you learned as children. As I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.

If I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. That's an expansion of the same idea. Into your hands I commit my spirit.

A nighttime prayer. Isn't it amazing if that's true, that's the way things were, that Jesus as he is about to die, goes back to the prayer his mom taught him as a toddler.

[31 : 12] Clearly he's dying in peace. He's laying his head on the pillow. And he's saying to his father, into your hands I commit my spirit.

As I go to sleep now, I trust you to take care of my spirit. I've come through the darkness, and now I am dying in peace for my people.

It's a poignant thought. As I said, it's a thought I return to again and again, that Jesus in these moments turned to that boyhood prayer and expressed his complete confidence in the father and his peace at the last by praying that prayer.

And of course Jesus can give us his peace, his peace for every day and for every night, and his peace for our final day and our final night in this world.

God, if we trust in Jesus, we can in Jesus say the same thing. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit and trust that the Father will always look after our spirit, our soul, in this world and forever in the world to come.

[32 : 30] The only way to die in peace is to trust in Jesus. Then we can live in peace and die in peace because everything is in him.

So here, heaven's cross, a prayer to heaven, a promise of heaven, judgment from heaven, access to heaven, and the peace of heaven, all because of Jesus.

Everything that I say today and everything that we do at this table is all for Jesus in remembrance of him and for his praise.

glory. Amen. I'll leave it there. We'll be right back.