

Part 85: The Peacefully Lullaby of the Cross

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For just \$48 dollars, you can find an artist who sells hand painted coffee mugs. One of those mugs features beautiful flowers, and in big block letters it says: "Everything Dies."

Despite the shockingly bleak message, it's sold out.

The mug is humorous because death is so common that we almost forget about how out of place it is until something as ironic as this mug reminds us. It's easy for us to live in this odd tension of assuming death, and yet living unaware of it at the same time.

Which is why it's so important for us to pay close attention to one particular death which, like a bucket of cold water, awakens us to realities we often forget. That death, is what we look at this Palm Sunday, the death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We can't understand Jesus death apart from his subsequent resurrection which we will look at next Sunday. But we must also understand Jesus' death in its own right.

Why did Jesus die? What did his death accomplish? And why does it matter to us? More than a mug that sits on our shelves providing us an occasional reminder of our own mortality—the death of Jesus is of daily significance to the believer. Other writers of the gospel draw out certain themes of significance. Matthew and Mark for instance focus on Jesus' painful substitutionary punishment and atonement as they include Jesus quoting from Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me."

But what we will see today is that Luke is drawing out for us another angle from which we should consider the cross. That angle is the ironic peace and rest that the cross brought. What should we see when we stare with the eyes of faith at Jesus' cross? The peace of Christ in the face of death and worry that can bring us peace as well.

This is our main point this morning: **Jesus had peace in his death, and so can we.** In the midst of our own agony, and even our own death, our peace is in the death of Jesus.

We are going to see this in two ways. First we are going to examine the witnesses of the cross that we might have **Peace in the Reality of the Cross**, but second we are going to examine how we might have **Peace in the Work of the Cross**.

Let's begin by examining our first point today: **Peace in the Reality of the Cross.**

Luke opens his book explaining that his goal is to investigate, through eyewitness accounts, the reality of the events surrounding Jesus' life and to then piece them together in an organized account. In other words it really happened.

Luke is writing for saints with skeptics in mind. Here he calls three witnesses meant to validate not only the events of the cross, but the significance of them. He wants us to have credible certainty about real history. He does this by showing us three witnesses to the cross.

This is our first witness: a ***Miraculous Witnesses***, **Luke 23:44-45** "It was about the sixth hour (noon) and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two."

What are these two miracles? The first is that the sun itself failed and the whole land became dark even at midday. The second, is that the temple curtain was torn in two on its own without human help.

It's helpful to note that the visibility of these two signs were easily falsifiable if they were not true. The Jews who opposed Jesus in the temple would only have had to produce the untorn curtain to disprove it. Others in Jerusalem would only have to say, "I was around that day, and the sun didn't do anything weird." But there are no reports that contradict these divine events.

These events happened to show that Jesus' death was not an ordinary death. Lots of people die. But the sun has never died with them. Lots of people have had their flesh torn, none of them corresponded with the tearing of a curtain in a distant location.

There's a symbolism with the curtain we will discuss more in a moment, but certainly the failing of the sun in the middle of the day was God's dimming of the lights. My kids have all had some glow in the dark stars on their ceilings. However, you can't see them when it's bright, but instead they shine brightest when it's dark. But, those stars were glowing just as much when it was bright, however—we just can't see it. But here, God dimmed the light of the sun so that we might see more clearly the delicate light of his own son on the cross.

Luke then records for us a second witness—the ***Divine Witness***. This from Jesus himself, **Luke 23:46**, "Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, 'Father into your hands I commit my spirit!' And having said this, he breathed his last."

I'm not sure how many of you are familiar with the Old Monty Python bit where a woman is trying to convince the undertaker that her sick husband is already dead. "I'm not dead yet, I'm getting better," says the husband. But the wife responds, "No you're not, you'll be stone dead in a moment."

Jesus here is doing the opposite. He's not claiming to be falling into a trance. He's telling us very clearly that he is dying. Luke the physician, affirms this by noting that after Jesus says this, he breathed his last—he expired.

Now the passage of scripture Jesus quotes while he was dying is significant. We already know that Jesus spoke of his death in Luke 12 saying that he was in great distress in anticipation of the cross. But here on the cross, he quotes Psalm 31: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

This Psalm was the nightly psalm that Jews would read as they went to bed.

In other words as the other gospel writers focused on themes of Jesus' experience of forsakenness, Luke shows that simultaneous to it, is Jesus' deep intimacy with the Father. How intimate was it? So intimate that while he was dying for the sins of the world he cried out a lullaby of trust to his heavenly Father.

But how would the one who experienced the full weight of condemnation before the also be able to entrust himself to the Father in his death? Because this was the role of the Son. This was the purpose for which Jesus was sent.

This statement was not for the crowds, it was not for the criminals, this statement was a display of deep intimacy and fellowship between our Triune God where the Son, in the midst of agonizing pain, cried out through the Spirit to the Father with pure and certain peace. Through the unknown veil of death—Jesus entrusted himself to the known beauty of the Father. His cry showed that his sacrifice was acceptable before the Father as the sufficient climax to his atoning work to die for sinners.

And finally, Luke shows us ***Human Witnesses***.

Isn't it interesting that what we normally think as of greatest validation follows Luke's almost as an afterthought? Creation groaned at the reality of Jesus' death. The Trinity broke into humanity as Jesus' humanity was finally broken to death. And oh yeah, some people saw it too.

Who are these people? Well it's a laundry list. And part of this list is to give a sort of court document of witnesses who could be asked about this event. He tells us first not only of "a Centurion" but "the Centurion," the one who would have been known. Ask anyone in the crowd he says. Talk to his acquaintances or the well-known women who followed him.

The details surrounding Joseph of Arimathea also give specific details in **Luke 23:50-55**. He was from the Jewish town of Arimathea (he gives us his address). He was a member of the council (he tells us he was publically known). He asked Pilate (he was publically identified). He buried the body in a specific tomb, with specific details, and it was witnessed and visited by these specific women.

Part of this is to eliminate any confusion about the resurrection being some kind of hoax. People knew the tomb, they didn't come to the wrong one. There was no other body in the tomb, so it couldn't have been that they mixed up Jesus body. It was a public death, verified by public people, buried in a public tomb, and this was publically known.

This it's not just critical scholars who try to deny the historicity of the gospel. Sometimes, if we are not careful, we can treat the events of the cross like a moral fable. But let us not forget this really happened. What we confess in the gospel is not myth, it is history, which means the reality of it is also of importance to your daily reality as well. Jesus did die, but there was also more going on here than meets the eye.

This is where we go next, our second point this morning: **Peace in the Work of the Cross**.

What did Jesus' death accomplish for us? What does Jesus death do for you? This question is the Christian publisher's dream. We will never exhaust what Jesus death did for us.

John Piper has a book titled, "50 Reasons Jesus Came to Die." John Owen says that there are a full number of things Jesus' death did, but he narrows it down to four core truths: reconciliation, justification, sanctification, and adoption. Another John, John Stott also provides four: propitiation, redemption, justification and reconciliation.

Luke here draws our attention to two specific works the cross accomplished by drawing on two core Old Testament themes: the temple and the Sabbath. Both of these are connected with the peace and reunion Jesus cherished in his final moments. In other words, Luke shows us how the cross works for unity and for rest.

First, we can see that ***The Cross Brings Unity.***

This unity is what is put on display with the tearing of the temple curtain. It's important to notice in verse 45-46 that Jesus did not die until that curtain was torn. It was as if the final act he would do was tear that thing down the middle.

I had an uncle who worked at one of the power plants in Billings and he took us on a tour once and showed us the central combustion chamber. I remember looking through this tiny glass window, seeing a blazing ball of gas, and thinking to myself "Why are we here?" All that stands between me and being consumed is some screws and metal.

God's presence is that blazing center that will consume sin. And in the Old Testament that consuming presence of God was to dwell in the temple in what was called, the most Holy Place. However, he prescribed that a barrier be put in place between the most Holy Place and the rest of the temple so that sinners would not be consumed by his radiant glory.

Only one time a year was anyone allowed to go into that place—a high priest, chosen at random, after a series of sacrifices and offerings would be allowed to approach God's presence in this place. Everyone else stood behind the curtain.

It's that curtain which was torn when Jesus died. This is significant for two reasons.

First it seems to confirm what Jesus had been preparing the Jews for this whole time—the physical temple was no longer the place of God's presence. God's presence was no longer in a place, but in a people—the church—who Peter calls the temple of the living God.

But secondly, and in connection to this, it signifies that anyone can now come to God's presence through the work of Jesus Christ. What was reserved for male, Jewish, High-priests once a year has been cracked open for the rest of us always.

The author of Hebrews puts it this way: **Hebrews 9:11-12**, "But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent...he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption." He goes on in, **Hebrews 10:19-20**, to call his brothers to "approach with confidence the holy places by the blood of Jesus." How can we confidently enter the blazing center of God's glory? "by the new and living way he opened for us through the curtain, that is, his flesh."

Jesus brings everyone who comes, straight to God's blazing center. He brings us behind the veil by being pierced as the veil. We live in a day and age where everyone seems to be hungry for a transcendent and soul filling experience. For example I talk to many young men and women who are discontent in their jobs because it's not fulfilling for them or not providing them the meaning they hoped it would. Imagine

asking an iron worker in the 1940's if he felt his job brought him meaning and purpose? He would say, "It pays the mortgage and puts food on the table, so yeah it meets its purpose."

But today we are discontent with anything that doesn't enrapture our whole souls. Pay attention to marketing, they try to sell you the simplest things as holistically engulfing experiences. Some of you talk about your new bidet like it's a worship experience! It spills over into the demands we put on our relational or sex goals, our financial independence and our families. But none of those things ever seem to consume us the way we want.

All of this desire is biblically explained in the image of God. We were made to be consumed by something transcendent and only God is big enough to consume us as satisfy us in that way. We were made to be united to him, and everything else will inevitably disappoint. As Augustine famously said, "Our hearts are restless until we find out rest in him."

You can spend your time, your life, and your money trying to get beyond that curtain into the satisfaction you've always wanted. But it's only Jesus' blood that really takes us there. You want to get to Father, you've got to come through Jesus.

Who can come behind this curtain? Anyone as long as it's through Jesus. The gospel is universal in its offer, but exclusive in on its terms. Any can come, as long as they come through Christ.

We see how diverse the community of believers became and how powerfully persuasive Jesus' death was. Look again at verses **47-51**. A pagan Centurion proclaimed his innocence, a great multitude of people who came as entertainment seeking spectators left as convicted sinners, bold women stood by, a member of the council that killed Jesus stepped up in a big way. All are being united in their conviction that there was something unique about Jesus.

But there's a big problem isn't there! The temple veil has been torn, access to God has been granted. But God's dead! The missed the boat. As sincere as their conviction was, it seemed everything was too late.

So what now?

But here's where we see the second work of the cross: ***The Cross Brings Rest.***

As everyone tries to wrestle with the death of Jesus, there is a flurry of frantic activity that follows. This is because under the Jewish law, it was not allowable for anyone to hang on a tree overnight. Moreover, if the Jews didn't take Jesus' body, they would have simply thrown him in the wilderness and waited for animals to pick his corpse apart.

This is what led Joseph in a moment of bravery to risk it all in verse 52. Because he was a good man, because he was seeking the Kingdom of God, he asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. He risked all of his prestige, and his worldly position in order to honor and care for the body of Jesus.

If only all of us lived with such a weight of the moment in our walk with Jesus. How much more would our evangelistic efforts thrive if we knew we had but a few more hours left? What would you do with the gospel if you knew time was fleeting?

While none of us are pressed by the weight of the law and the Sabbath, we are pressed by the unknown weight of eternity. You do not know when Christ will return, or when you will return to the dust. J.C. Ryle has one of my favorite quotes on this. He says, "Today is the Lord's day. Tomorrow is the Devil's. The Devil doesn't care how spiritual your aspirations are if only they are to be done tomorrow." So let us live with such an urgency as well.

The women then, knew that not only did they have to get the body off the cross before night, but they had to prepare the body for burial before the Sabbath came and that kind of work would be prohibited. So Luke tells us they made haste in this way: **Luke 23:54**, "It was the day of Preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned and prepared spices and ointment. On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment."

But despite the haste of everyone involved, they weren't able to finish caring for Jesus' body. The women had to stop what they were doing, and for them to pay their final respects they would have to wait till Sunday morning.

I love how Luke says, "they rested" according to the commandment.

What great contrast there was on that Sabbath! Jesus' Sabbath rest was great. For the first time in nearly 30 years he experienced intimacy with the Trinity in a way that had been pressed by his messianic role. Luke records for us the reunion of the sinful prodigal to the good Father, and we can only imagine what the reunion was like for the perfect son to be welcomed home.

But what kind of "rest" do you think the rest of Jesus' followers had? On top of the confusion of Jesus' death, they were interrupted by the Sabbath command and had that constant burden of unfinished work hanging over their head.

I'm a terrible combination of being a very anxious person and also a person who doesn't sleep well. Which means I'll often try to go take a nap, but as soon as I lay down, I'm anxious about all the things I still need to get done. I think Luke was being intentional here as he concludes the death of Jesus saying, "On the Sabbath, they rested according to the commandment."

You see for those of us who live under the law, that's about as good as our rest can get: anxious, never satisfied, and never ending. Rest according to the law is never good enough. If we think that Jesus didn't do it all, then we can never rest. If the cross only started the work, then we feel like we have to finish it.

I wonder if you've felt that weight. I wonder if your life is that kind of rest. Restless and tortured. There's always more obedience we know we could have offered. There's always another person who we will have to outperform, another sin we need to white knuckle into submission, another test we have to pass, another ointment we have to make, another goat to sacrifice, another task left unfinished.

But what sweet irony that here, the law forced these women to stop, to rest according to the commandment-but little did they know their rest was just beginning. For Jesus, dead and buried for three days, was fulfilling that commandment. As the author of Hebrews says, **Hebrews 9:14**, "How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God."

You see Joseph bought the tomb, the women bought spices, and the crowds beat their breasts as if to say: "it's the least we can do." Such is the mindset of those held captive to dead works. You can't offer anything that will purify your conscience, no matter how near you stood to the cross. Only Jesus can purify your conscience, and the cross he gives you that offer.

Rest, my brothers and sisters. Lay down your ointment and rest in the offering of grace in Jesus. Do not beat your breasts and return home, beat your breast and run to the cross.

You see if you want the kingdom of God, if you're searching for a way around the curtain, you've got to ask for the body of Jesus. If Joseph only knew the deep paradigm he was modeling. He wanted the kingdom, he wanted the rest and the relief for sin weary and sorrow worn souls, and he asked for the body. He was looking for the kingdom and he asked for Jesus. That's true for you and me. He realized the kingdom wasn't in the teaching, it was in the teacher. It wasn't in the royal robes, it was in the burial shroud.

And while Joseph, these women, and the many others took the body of Jesus and rested in incomplete joy--Sunday was coming. Everything dies, but somethings rise. The glow in the dark star was about to become a radiant light.

These women wanted to pay their respects at Jesus' tomb but were forced to rest one final time because God had so designed for them to return to their tomb and pay their worship.

Brothers and sisters, as I remind my kids every night before bed, "This world is hard, our sins are many and our needs are great." But Sunday comes. Jesus, in the face of his own sorrow committed his spirit in full confidence to the Father, and because Sunday comes, so can you.

Jesus faced the sting of death and the darkness of this world in confident hope that he would be accepted by the Father, and because Sunday comes, so can you.

The jazz artist Duke Ellington and Mahalia Jackson have a song where they bemoan the pain of life and it goes like this: "Lord, dear Lord of Love / God almighty, God above/ Please look down and see my people through// Up from dawn 'till sunset/ Man work hard all day/ Come Sunday, oh come Sunday, that's the day // He'll give peace and comfort/ To every troubled mind/ Come Sunday, oh come Sunday, that's the day.