

The Death that Changes Everything

Luke 23:44-49

Introduction

Details of Death: I have a confession. I love true crime podcasts. And I'm not alone. True crime is a rapidly expanding media genre with 84% of US adults consuming it in some form.¹ True crime podcast listeners have tripled over the last 5 years from 6.7 million to 19.1 million weekly listeners (majority women)!²

- Just be careful if you look at my podcast history (*Unsolved Mysteries* → *Making of a Murderer* → *How to Get Away with Murder*).
- I don't think it's just me. Our culture has always been obsessed with the details of death. Whether it's the assassination of JFK or the death of Princess Diana, we have questions, and we want answers: whether morbid curiosity, the psychological thrill of solving a "whodunnit," or the desire to understand the motivations behind wicked human behavior.³

The Death: In Luke 23, we come to the **most significant death in all of history**, and we find almost no details. Luke simply says, "and there they crucified him" (Lk 23:33). Very little detail. No gore. No drawn-out description. Modern descriptions and portrayals (e.g., *The Passion of the Christ*) zoom in on the brutality (understandably so). It's not unimportant to consider the physical suffering of Jesus on the cross.

- But everyone in the first century Roman Empire would have known what crucifixion was. They had seen it. In some crazy way, they were *familiar* with it. **Familiarity can so easily blind us to the meaning right in front of us.**
- Luke is trying to help us see through the suffering to see the significance. This is not just a death; it is *the death that changes everything*.
- Luke highlights the unique significance of Jesus' death. He is not simply another criminal being executed, but the righteous Son of God who willingly laid his life down. And his death is not simply a historical moment to be analyzed; it is a world-changing reality that demands a response. This is not another true crime episode to scratch your curiosity, but a cosmic moment meant to confront you.
- **The death of Jesus demands a response from you.**
 - 1. See the Significance of Jesus' Death (vv. 44-45)
 - 2. Trust the Savior Who Gave Himself for You (vv. 46)
 - 3. Respond to the Savior You Have Seen (vv. 47-49)

⁴⁴ It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, ⁴⁵ while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶ Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said

¹ Edison Research, audiochuck

² Pew Research Center

³ "Why are we fascinated by true crime?" (Scott Jared).

<https://www.unc.edu/posts/2024/01/11/why-are-we-fascinated-by-true-crime/>

this he breathed his last. ⁴⁷ Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, “Certainly this man was innocent!” ⁴⁸ And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. ⁴⁹ And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things.

1. See the Significance of Jesus’ Death (vv. 44-45)

Darkness: ⁴⁴ It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, ⁴⁵ while the sun’s light failed.

- We are coming to the **climax** of the **crucifixion** narrative. Jesus has been unjustly condemned, mocked, beaten, and crucified. He has continued to demonstrate his compassion on the crowds, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34) and on the criminals, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:43).
- “As the crucifixion proceeds, the heavens begin to comment” (Bock).
 - The crucifixion began at the third hour (starting from sunrise), 9 am;⁴ darkness begins at the sixth hour (3 pm),⁵ and Jesus dies at the ninth hour (3 pm).⁶

What does the darkness mean?

- **(1) Supernatural:** It is a scary moment when the sun begins to fail. If the sun fails, that is lights out (*pun intended*).
 - Darkness is scary (e.g., kids afraid of the dark, night light, etc.). Nothing is scarier than a church building at night with the lights off.
 - The darkness makes us feel exposed and vulnerable. It’s terrifying because anything can be lurking there.
 - This is not a normal nightfall. This is **darkness in the middle of the day**. Something cosmic and apocalyptic is happening. It’s as if creation itself is breaking down.
 - Plenty of people have been trying to explain this from the beginning. Ancient writers posited this might be a solar eclipse⁷ or some other natural phenomenon.⁸ It actually couldn’t be a solar eclipse because it happened at Passover, a full moon (thanks Jewish lunar calendar) and a solar eclipse requires a new moon (i.e., astronomically impossible).⁹
 - This isn’t *natural* it is *supernatural*. It is precisely the supernatural origin that gets our attention. *God is saying something*. This isn’t simply a dramatic display, it’s a divine declaration.
 - “The spiritual darkness that engulfs Christ, is symbolized in the physical darkness that engulfs Jerusalem” (Begg).
- **(2) Theological:** In the history of God’s activity, darkness is a sign of his judgment.

⁴ Mk 15:25

⁵ Lk 23:44

⁶ Lk 23:44, Matt 27:46-50

⁷ Thallus, Phlegon of Tralles, Tertullian, Julius Africanus

⁸ E.g., Mediterranean Wind

⁹ “Supernatural cause or providential coincidence” (Plummer).

- The prophet **Amos** says that God's coming judgment will be accompanied by darkness: "And on that day,' declares the Lord GOD, 'I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight'" (Amos 8:9).
- The prophet **Joel** warned, "The sun shall be turned to darkness... before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes" (Joel 2:31).
- **Zephaniah** says: "A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness" (Zeph 1:15).
- The Hebrew Bible makes clear that "the day of darkness" is a "day of God's judgment," and Jesus warned in the Garden that an hour of darkness was coming (Lk 22:53).
 - This isn't a weather problem, it's a wrath problem.
- Maybe the most clear connection I see between darkness and judgment is in Exodus. The people of God are in slavery in Egypt, to demonstrate his power and free them from the wicked Pharaoh, God sends **ten** plagues of judgment on the people and the land.
 - The *tenth* and final judgment, God kills the firstborn son of every household.
 - The *ninth* plague, the last one before this terrifying and final punishment, is darkness.
 - In the tenth plague, the only way to be spared the judgment is to sacrifice an unblemished lamb and put its blood on the doorposts. The destroyer will "passover" (Passover is Wednesday, April 1).¹⁰ Do you see it?
 - The judgment of God is coming on the land. The people are enslaved to a much more sinister tyrant than Pharaoh; they are enslaved to sin. **We are enslaved to sin.**
 - Jesus is the perfect, spotless Passover lamb of God¹¹ who takes our punishment so we can be saved. [John] saw Jesus... and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn 1:29).
 - "The rulers scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!'" (Lk 23:35). **He saved others by *not* saving himself!**
 - The judgment of God comes down on Jesus, so it doesn't come down on us.
 - Judgment falls, but not where we would expect. Instead of falling on us, the guilty, it falls on Jesus, the innocent.
 - The shocking truth of the gospel is that the darkness of God's judgment isn't falling on sinners, it's falling on the Savior.
 - Life without God is darkness, but Jesus is the light that overcomes the darkness.¹²
 - When God's judgment comes, will it fall on you or has it already fallen on Christ in your place?

¹⁰ April 1, 2026

¹¹ Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed (1 Cor 5:7).

¹² "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn 1:5).

- How should you live knowing that the only reason you're spared is that the Son of God died in your place?

Divine Vandalism: And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. In a dramatic moment, the temple's heavy curtain is torn.

- It is approximately 60 feet tall and 30 feet wide,¹³ made of fine Babylonian cloth.¹⁴ Later, Rabbis described it as thick as a man's hand.¹⁵
 - This isn't a paper towel, it's a wall (cf. Phone book strong man).
- It separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple.¹⁶
 - This curtain was a physical barrier to the most holy place on earth.
 - The Holy of Holies was the location of YHWH's throne, the ark of the covenant, the physical manifestation of his presence.
 - Because of sin, no one could enter the HoH without incurring divine death. Sin cannot persist in God's presence without being consumed by his righteous love.
 - You don't just stroll onto the White House Lawn if you don't want to be tackled by Secret Service agents, snacked on by their K9 companions, or greeted by rooftop snipers. How much more the presence of the living God?
 - Only once a year could the high priest enter this sacred space to offer annual atonement for the people's sins.
 - Even the high priest had to offer a sacrifice for his own sin before he could enter to make a sacrifice for the sins of those he represented.¹⁷ But Jesus, as our "great high priest" (Heb 4:14) offers no sacrifice to enter God's presence. In fact, he is the sacrifice. He "bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Pet 2:24).
- Matthew and Mark make the point that it is torn from top to bottom.¹⁸
 - The death of Jesus removes the barrier between us and God.
 - This isn't human vandalism but divine intervention.
 - We who were "once were far off" from God¹⁹ "have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Eph 2:13).
 - ¹⁹ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith (Heb 10:19-22a).
 - Because of Jesus, you have unbroken access to God. What a gift!
 - There is no other way to enter the presence of God.

¹³ Josephus *JW* 5.5.4–5

¹⁴ Josephus

¹⁵ Mishnah

¹⁶ The term is slightly ambiguous and *could* refer to the outer curtain.

¹⁷ Lev 16:6, 11

¹⁸ Matt 27:51, Mk 15:38

¹⁹ Cf. Ex 20:21, Ps 22:19, Lk 16:23, Lk 18:13, Acts 2:39, Eph 2:13

I Saw the Sign: “I saw the sign, and it opened up my eyes, I saw the sign. Life is demanding without understanding” (“The Sign,” Ace of Base).

- Can you see what this really is now? This is no ordinary death. Luke isn’t simply *recording* Jesus’ death but explaining it.
- The signs are undeniable that something cosmically significant is going on. Without these signs, the people might miss it.
 - The cross was a familiar sight in the Roman Empire.²⁰ People had seen crucifixions outside cities and along highways. They assumed the men on these crosses were criminals or rebels getting what they deserved. God is getting their attention that this is not simply another guilty man being executed. **This cross is different.** This is the righteous Son of God giving his life.
- We can miss it too. We see crosses on jewelry, t-shirts, and church buildings. The most extraordinary moment in history can become an ordinary part of our lives.
- Has the most important event in history become ordinary to you? Have you gotten so used to the cross that you no longer see its significance and feel its weight?
 - The problem for us is not that we’ve never seen the cross, but that we’ve stopped seeing it.

If this is what was happening at the cross, then you can trust the one who was on it.

2. Trust the Savior Who Gave Himself for You (vv. 46)

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.

Loud Words: The gospels make a big deal about Jesus speaking with a loud voice before his death.²¹ Despite his weakness and exhaustion, he is not fading. His life is not being *taken* from him; it is being given by him.

- He isn’t losing his life; he is laying it down (I commit my spirit).
- He breathed his last²² comes from the word to exhale or breathe out (lit. breath or spirit coming out).
- Even in death, Jesus is not a victim of circumstances; he purposely goes to his death.
 - He does not die accidentally, helplessly, or reluctantly.
 - You can trust a Savior who willingly and righteously dies for you.

Last Words: Last words are lasting words. Luke records the final words of Jesus before he dies. What is significant about his last words?

- **(1) Scripture.** Jesus quotes Psalm 31:5. As in Matthew in Mark where they record him quoting Psalm 22:1, **Jesus dies with Scripture on his lips.** Jesus dies as he lived, saturated with the Word of God.

²⁰ Josephus, Seneca, etc.

²¹ Mk 15:37, Matt 27:50

²² ἐξέπνευσεν

- **(2) Trust.**²³ The particular psalm he quotes is a prayer of a righteous sufferer. “But I trust in you, O LORD, I say, ‘You are my God.’ My times are in your hand” (Ps 31:14-15a).
 - Jesus faces death with complete trust. He trusts God’s character, God’s plan, and the promise of resurrection.
 - He is entrusting himself to his loving father. The perfect Son trusts the perfect Father.
 - We see in Jesus’ trust the pattern for our trust. We can trust God’s perfect plan in all circumstances.
 - We are called to entrust our lives into the hands of our loving God. We don’t need to defend ourselves or control our situation.
 - If Jesus gave himself for you, he is worthy of your trust. Will you trust the one who died for you?

Once you see Jesus trusting the Father and willingly giving his life, you can’t just admire him, you have to respond to him.

3. Respond to the Savior You Have Seen (vv. 47-49)

⁷ Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, “Certainly this man was innocent!” ⁴⁸ And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. ⁴⁹ And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things.

Decision: Jesus’ death is a uniquely significant, righteous, God-ordained event that demands a response. All of the signs that happen highlight it’s significance, and our response should flow out of it.

- The point of decision: Who is this man? “You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse... You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God... But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us” (C. S. Lewis).

3 Responses: (1) Caution, (2) Conviction, (3) Confession

- **(1) Caution:** ⁴⁹ And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things.
 - Echoing the Psalmist, “My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague, and my nearest kin stand far off” (Ps 38:11).
 - These are not his formal disciples, but those who knew him (i.e., acquaintances).²⁴ They might have been the people that followed in the crowd to

²³ Each Gospel records different final words of Jesus to emphasize different aspects of his death: Matthew and Mark highlight his cry of abandonment (Ps 22:1), John emphasizes completion (“It is finished”), while Luke uniquely records a prayer of trust (Ps 31:5), showing that Jesus dies entrusting himself to the Father.

²⁴ οἱ γνωστοὶ αὐτῷ *contra* μαθηταί

hear his teaching. They are interested and sympathetic to his message, but at this moment they can't come near to Jesus.

- It's possible to listen to Jesus but keep your distance.
- I get it. If I was in that situation, I would keep my distance too. I don't want to end up on a cross either.
 - Some of you are compelled to watch Jesus, but afraid to get close.²⁵
 - Btw, only the resurrection would be sufficient to overcome their fear.
- (2) **Conviction:**⁴⁸ And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts.
 - The fickle crowd²⁶ who has participated in the sham proceedings (e.g., releasing Barabbas, etc.), doesn't know what to do.
 - They know it was all wrong, they got caught up in the spectacle.²⁷
 - They feel the conviction of their sins, but they don't know what to do with it.
 - They go home sad, rather than go to the Savior in repentance.
 - How many of us leave church with guilt and conviction rather than go to Jesus with repentance and surrender?
- (3) **Confession:**⁴⁷ Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent!"
 - Maybe the least likely person to see what is going on: the centurion.²⁸
 - It wasn't a Jewish religious leader or a disciple that made this confession, but a Gentile military officer. The man overseeing the execution recognizes what is really going on.
 - He saw the signs for what they were.
 - The signs are not a guarantee; lots of people see the signs, but not everyone understands. Two people can see the same signs and make completely different choices. One person sees a yellow light and slows down, while another sees it and speeds up.
 - "We don't see things as they are, we see things as we are."
 - "What we see when we think we are looking into the depths of Scripture may sometimes be only the reflection of our own silly faces" (Lewis).
 - The question isn't whether you've witnessed enough; the question is whether your heart is ready to see it.
 - What does he say? This man was innocent (lit. righteous).²⁹
 - There certainly is a *civil* component to this reality. This man was wrongly convicted in court. He committed no criminal act.
 - This is a theme. Pilate says, "I find no guilt in this man" (Lk 23:4). Herod says there is "nothing deserving death... done by him" (Lk

²⁵ Another mark of authenticity that the writers of the gospels include the shortcomings of Jesus' followers.

²⁶ οἱ ὄχλοι

²⁷ θεωρία

²⁸ Here and Matthew (ὁ ἑκατοντάρχης), Mark uses Latin term (ὁ κεντυρίων); cf. John Wayne in *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965)

²⁹ δίκαιος (Matthew and Mark including the confession of Jesus as the Son of God, though all the synoptics have a confession making it *more* likely and credible).

23:15). Even the criminal on the cross says, "this man has done nothing wrong" (Lk 23:41).

- But more than that, there is a **religious** component. Standing before the just judge of the universe, Jesus is perfectly righteous.
- Jesus is the only truly righteous one. The man dying on the cross is completely innocent.
 - Why is the innocent one being executed? Because the unrighteous need a righteous substitute. **We are the unrighteous.**
 - I was listening to a professor describe his journey in religion. He set out to read major religious texts: the Qur'an, the Bhagavad Gita, the Book of Mormon, and the Bible. As he was reading, he realized they pretty much said the same thing: be a good person, live a good life, do the right thing, and you'll be okay... *except the Bible*. It says, "You are not a good person; you can't save yourself; you need a Savior." God loves you enough to tell you the truth, not what you want to hear, but what you *need to hear*.
 - "None is righteous" (Rom 3:10) except Jesus. In one episode of The Simpsons, Homer finished reading through the Bible and said, "Everyone in this book is a mess...except this one guy."
 - The gospel tells us the bad news that we are unrighteous and the unbelievably good news that the righteous one dies for the unrighteous. The innocent one takes the place of the guilty. Jesus, the innocent one, dies so that we, the guilty, can go free. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21).

Conclusion

Take a moment and look at the cross. The death of Jesus demands a response from you. How will you respond?

- Will you simply admire him from a distance?
- Will you recognize your sin but go home in despair?
- Or will you confess your sin and his righteousness and place your faith in him?
- I don't want you leaving here simply *looking* at the cross; I want you to come to the Savior. The cross is not something to admire; it lifts high the one you should trust.
- Have you placed your faith fully and finally in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins?