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He Breathed His Last

Luke 23:44-56

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Can we trust the biblical accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection? We talk about faith. Do we have good reason to follow Jesus in faith despite all the critics of our faith? Are we crazy for giving our selves over for the sake of Jesus' message, even when it means ridicule, rejection and, sometimes, persecution and even martyrdom? St. Luke wrote his Gospel to answer just these questions. Just over two years ago—Yes! It's been that long—we began our look at Luke's account of Jesus and his ministry and we began with his opening words:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

Luke wrote to someone named Theophilus. The name means "Lover of God" or "Beloved of God". He might have been a real person, maybe a patron who helped cover Luke's expenses as he travelled and researched and wrote. Or "Theophilus" could be code for believers in general: those who love God and are loved by him. Whatever the case, Luke was writing to a gentile audience—to converts from paganism—and he wrote to assure them that their faith was not misplaced. The first Christians were

Jewish. They claimed to be *true* Israel and the true followers of Israel's God, but over the years they had faced horrible persecution at the hands of the Jews and their religious authorities. These gentile converts began to have some doubts. Jesus had foretold a coming judgement on rebellious and faithless Israel—judgement that would come within a generation—but twenty or thirty years had passed and nothing had happened. The temple was still there, so were the corrupt religious leaders, the political strife of Jesus' day had only become worse. Again, was Jesus all people claimed him to be? Was he truly Lord? People were asking and Luke wrote his Gospel to answer them and to assure them.

He's carefully constructed his story from the beginning. Jesus' story is Israel's story and his ministry is the culmination of Israel's history. Luke shows us that Jesus was not unexpected. The Scriptures foretold his coming. Many in Israel were waiting for him, even if they didn't recognize him when he came. And Luke fills his Gospel with eyewitness accounts. But now, here at the end of the story, Luke slows the pace and he starts packing in the eyewitnesses. Jesus' life was important; his teaching was important; his miracles were important; but it all stands or falls on his death and resurrection. We know from Matthew's Gospel that "official" stories were quickly put into circulation that the empty tomb was the result of sleeping soldiers who had allowed the disciples to steal Jesus' body. Luke puts those stories and denials to rest. The crowds had demanded Jesus be crucified; crowds gathered on the roadside as he was led out of the city to be executed; many watched at the foot of the cross, including Pilates' soldiers and the members of the Sanhedrin. They stood below ridiculing and mocking Jesus. All of these people were witnesses.

Starting at 23:44 Luke slows the pace. We've been rushed to the cross, but now the key moments in Jesus'

ministry are about to take place and Luke wants to be sure we're paying attention. He writes:

It was now about the sixth hour, 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. (Luke 23:44-45)

This is the first time Luke gives us a reference to the time of day so specifically. At the sixth hour—that's nine o'clock in the morning—darkness fell on the land and it lasted for three long hours, until noon. Luke doesn't tell us what caused the darkness. Passover takes place at the time of the new moon and it's an astronomical impossibility for the sun to be eclipsed during a new moon. The darkness could have been the result of a providentially timed dust storm or unusually heavy cloud cover. It may have been entirely supernatural. The cause isn't what's important; what's important is the *symbolism* of the darkness itself and that it happened. Passages in the prophets—passages like Joel 2:30-31 and many others—describe the Day of the Lord, the day of judgement—coming in darkness. The sun stops giving light and the moon turns to blood.

Even the sky, even the sun proclaims that something awful, something important, something that is about to change the history of the world, the whole cosmos, is taking place there at the cross. The darkness that fell is a reminder that at the cross evil did its worst. The Satan knew that everything, that humanity's fate and that his fate, depended on what would happen to Jesus this day. He marshalled every power he had—even corrupting one of Jesus' own disciples—to bring Jesus to this point. Jesus' whipped body, the crown of thorns pressed on his bleeding head, the blood pouring from his wounds, the nails in his hands, the angry and jeering crowd were the devil at his worst and at his most powerful. His darkness engulfed the land as his evil

wrapped itself around Jesus and around the people of Jerusalem. By all accounts, the Satan had led the people of God into darkness, into apostasy, and there in the dark, having crucified their Messiah, their only source of hope, they *should* have been forever lost.

And yet there's still hope in the darkness. Evil must be judged and with judgement comes the breaking in of light. A holy God cannot allow rebellion and apostasy and evil to go on forever unchecked. Six hundred years earlier darkness had engulfed the people of Judah. Six hundred years earlier the Lord had brought judgement on them in the armies of Babylon. The people of Judah were carried away into exile and Jerusalem destroyed. But in the midst of that darkness there was hope. A remnant in Israel recognised the Lord's discipline and called the people to repentance, called the people back to faith in the Lord and to faith in his covenant and through them the nation was born again. And so in the darkness there is hope and those huddled in the temple to escape the darkness were the first to get a taste of it. Evil can do its worst, but evil's worst is no match for God.

Luke says that as Jesus died the curtain in the temple was torn in two. There were two curtains in the temple. The first separated the temple itself from the court—it kept the ordinary people out of the temple. The second curtain separated the main body of the temple from the Holy of Holies—the place where the ark of the covenant had been kept and where the Lord had once manifested his presence in a visible cloud of glory resting on the ark. No one was allowed into the Holy of Holies except the high priest, and then only one day a year. One of those curtains was torn in two as Jesus died, whether the curtain that kept the ordinary people from the temple or the one that kept the priests from the Holy of Holies, the meaning is clear either

way: the Lord was judging the temple and the whole system connected with it. Jesus had spent his life welcoming people into the kingdom, into the Lord's presence and when he embraced them he bypassed the temple and the priests and the sacrificial system. Jesus offered himself as a means of reconciliation between lost and sinful human beings and the Lord. He was the mediator between human beings and God—not the priests, not the altar, not the temple. He went so far as to act this out prophetically when he upset the temple at the beginning of his final week in Jerusalem. The scribes, the Pharisees, and the priests were angry with Jesus for doing all of this. But here the Father vindicates his Son. As Jesus gave his life for the sake of sinners, the Lord tore the curtain and symbolically opened the way for sinners into his presence and announced the end of the temple of the priests and of the sacrifices they made. In the midst of darkness the Lord went straight to the centre of it—to the temple originally built to honour him now corrupted by the Satan—and gave a foretaste of the coming judgement. Evil, corruption, and sin would not be permitted—and especially not in the house of the Lord. The judgement Jesus foretold was set in motion on the wicked tenants who had claimed the vineyard for themselves and murdered the owner's son.

Luke goes on in verse 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.

As he breathes his last, Jesus cites the words of Psalm 31:5:

**Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O
LORD, faithful God.**

These are the words of a man who had been beaten down and defeated by his

enemies—persecuted for the sake of righteousness—but he held onto his faith in the never-failing faithfulness of the Lord. Luke reminds us that despite not wanting to suffer these things, despite praying for his Father to provide another way to redeem humanity, Jesus never lost faith—in who he was, in what his mission was, in the good and wise sovereignty of his Father. Jesus' ministry could end here in agony and humiliation, but he was sure and certain that in the agony and humiliation he was accomplishing precisely what he had been sent to do. Here at the cross he was the Suffering Servant, the innocent giving his life for the sake of sinners. And so he could commend himself into the hands of his Father in faith.

Remember that Luke was writing this to fellow Christians facing persecution for their faith. They might be tempted to doubt, they might be tempted to lose faith, but Luke reminds them: Jesus didn't promise sunshine and rainbows, he didn't promise health and wealth; he calls his people to take up their *crosses* and to follow him. Faith in someone who promises health and wealth is easy. Following someone who promises persecution, rejection, and who calls us to give up our lives for his sake—that's hard. But we can place our faith in Jesus, we can follow him, giving up everything else, because we see his own unwavering faith, here as he died in humiliation. This was and this is still the plan. Even in the midst of the darkness, God is still sovereign.

Luke goes on:

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

watching these things. (Luke 23:48-49)

Here are the witnesses and they all testify to Jesus' death. Here at the cross, faith dawns in the most unlikely people: first in the criminal crucified beside Jesus and now in this Roman soldier—one of the men who had marched Jesus through the city, maybe one of the very men who had driven the nails through his wrists. He saw the inscription reading "This is the King of the Jews", he heard the crowds, he saw the gathering darkness, he saw Jesus there dying and he realized that it was all wrong. He knew a guilty man when he saw one. Jesus was nothing like Barabbas, he was nothing like the two other men crucified that day. Pilate was right: Jesus was innocent. And somehow and on some level the significance dawns on this man. The Lord was at work and Luke says that he praised God. Throughout Luke's Gospel people who praise God are people who see God's saving hand at work in Jesus.

Consider what this centurion's witness means. Someone might argue that the man crucified beside Jesus was a desperate man and that his witness wasn't particularly credible. He was a sinner and he knew it. He was ready to grasp at anything that might redeem him from condemnation. Some might argue that the disciples only believed in Jesus because he was their friend. But now Luke puts this Roman centurion in front of us. He was undoubtedly a gentile. He didn't buy into this Jewish nonsense. He was a practical man with both feet planted firmly on the ground and yet here he was praising God because in Jesus he could see him at work.

Luke also shows us the crowds. They had been mocking Jesus, but now remorse sets in. He says that they went home beating their breasts. That's usually a sign of sorrow and of repentance. In the midst of the darkness, as evil does its worst,

working through a people deceived and duped into doing horrible wrong, there's a glimmer of hope in their repentance. And yet the disciples are nowhere to be seen and the women who knew Jesus stand at a distance. They're eyewitnesses, but Jesus can say with the psalmist:

**My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague,
and my nearest kin stand far off.** (Psalm 38:11)

These are the eyewitnesses to Jesus' death. It's no good suggesting that Jesus never died—that it was a case of mistaken identity. Everyone knew who he was. And it's no good claiming that he didn't really die. Everyone saw it happen: the soldiers, members of the Sanhedrin, the crowds, his friends. These aren't events that anyone could forget. All Jerusalem stood as a witness: Jesus died that day when an eclipse was physically impossible, but on which the sky went dark anyway—the day when the heavy and expensive curtain in the temple was torn in two. No one could forget that day!

But Jesus' death isn't the end. Luke continues presenting eyewitnesses. Look at verses 50-54:

Now there was a man named Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea. He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man, who had not consented to their decision and action; and he was looking for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid. It was the day of Preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning.

Joseph of Arimathea stands as witness to Jesus' death. He was the one who asked Pilate for Jesus' body and then

gave his own tomb as a place of burial. He and his servants took the body, they prepared it for burial that afternoon, and they placed it in the tomb. They could testify to the fact that Jesus was truly dead, not just unconscious. And Luke makes sure we're aware of his credentials as a faithful witness. Joseph was a member of the "council"—the Sanhedrin—the same body that had condemned Jesus, taken him to Pilate, and insisted on his execution. Unlike the other members of the Sanhedrin, Joseph was good and righteous. He had cast a dissenting vote when it came to Jesus. And first century people are given a sense of his goodness in the way he cared for Jesus' body. To bury the poor—and especially the condemned—was a sign of great piety. And yet Joseph goes to extremes in offering his own, unused tomb.

If we're not familiar with first century Jewish burial customs we might miss one of the most important reasons that Luke tells us this. Jews didn't just bury their loved ones in the ground. They used tombs and in those tombs bench-like shelves were cut. A body would be wrapped in linen and placed on one of the shelves for several months. Spices and ointments were used to cover the smell of decay. When the body had decomposed, family members would return to collect the bones and place them in an ossuary or bone-box. So when Jesus was placed in the tomb and the great stone seal rolled into place it wasn't like our burials: we seal the crypt or pile the dirt on the grave and that's the end of things. But Jesus' friends expected to come back, at least to collect his bones, but probably to apply spices and ointments at least several times. In fact, Luke tells us that they intended to come back very soon:

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 ointments. On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment. (Luke 23:55-56)

The women intended to anoint Jesus with spices and ointments. It was practical, but it was also a way of honouring him and saying their goodbyes. They would have done it that day, but sunset was coming and that meant Sabbath was beginning. They would have to wait until Sunday morning. But Luke presents these women as more eyewitnesses and pious ones at that—they weren't willing to violate the Sabbath, even for Jesus.

But what Luke's really getting at here, aside from making it clear that Jesus really and truly died, is that there was no chance of a mix-up with his body. Again, Jesus' friends—not to mention Joseph of Arimathea—intended to come back. That's what their burial customs required. And so they took careful note of the tomb. Joseph certainly knew the location of his own tomb, but we can be sure that when the women arrived on Sunday morning and found the tomb empty, it wasn't because they'd come to the wrong tomb. And Luke stresses that the tomb was unused. Sometimes there was more than one body in a tomb, but that wasn't the case with this tomb. Jesus was the only one in it. There were no mix-ups with either his body or the tomb—it *really* was empty that first Easter morning.

Brothers and Sisters, Luke gives us reasons to believe. Luke reveals with confidence that Jesus was who he claimed to be and that it was revealed in his crucifixion, his death, and his burial. Oddly enough, the very things—his death and burial—that proved to so many that day that Jesus was *not* the Messiah are the very things that prove he was. You see, nobody expected the Messiah to be crucified by Romans. Just the opposite, the Messiah was supposed to come in

glory as the Lord's champion, leading Israel to victory over Rome. People might have looked back on Jesus as a great prophet, but the fact that he was crucified proved he was not the Messiah. If his friends had come back on Sunday and found him still in the tomb, they would have anointed his body and they would have come back a few months later to collect the bones and they would have felt sorry for him and probably sorry for themselves for being so stupid and for thinking that he was the Messiah. If his body had still been in the tomb, Jesus' friends would have eventually acknowledged that the Sanhedrin was right: Jesus had, in fact, been leading Israel astray. And if they'd gone about their lives for another thirty or forty years and no judgement had come on Jerusalem, if the temple still stood a generation later, Jesus would have been chalked up as another false prophet.

But that's not what happened and that's why Luke takes such great pains here to present the eyewitnesses. The tomb *was* empty on Sunday morning and already we're seeing hints that Jesus will be vindicated as Messiah. If he wasn't the Messiah, why was evil working so hard to defeat him? In the midst of the darkness that Friday as Jesus died, something happened. The curtain in the temple was torn in two—something everyone would talk about for years. Judgement was coming on the temple and on the religious system that had rejected and condemned Jesus and his kingdom. In the midst of the darkness and as he died, the eyewitnesses testify that even Jesus himself remained faithful. Never once did he curse his persecutors, but instead he prayed for them and at the end he commended himself to the Lord.

There's obviously more to come. Neither the cross nor the tomb is the end of the story, but they are here at the centre of it. Jesus shed his blood at the cross for the sake of his people. He shed his blood at the cross to

forgive our sins—the life of the innocent given for the lives of the guilty. And Jesus calls us to trust in what he's accomplished here. Can we trust that he accomplished our redemption? Or was he just another failed messiah, like so many others? Jesus calls us not simply to have faith that here he has provided a means of forgiveness; he also calls those whom he has redeemed to follow him—to give up *everything*, even to suffer and maybe to die, for his sake, for the sake of his kingdom, and to make known to the world what he has done at the cross and to proclaim that he is the world's true Lord. Can we do that? Or are we fools for giving up so much for his sake? O Theophilus, O beloved of God, listen to Luke. Here we have the story of the eyewitnesses so that we may have certainty concerning the thing we have been taught, so that we may walk sure in faith.

Let us pray: Father we thank you for the gift of your Son, who not only humbled himself in taking on our humanity, but then suffered the humiliation and death we deserve for our sins. As we seek to put our faith in him, in his redeeming death and his life giving resurrection—all so incredible by human standards—we thank you for the witness you have given us in St. Luke and in the other evangelists that we may have certainty. As we read their words and as we think on them, strengthen our faith in Jesus that we might each day set aside everything else. We ask this in his name. Amen.