

Luke 23:26-33

²⁶As they led him away, they seized Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country. They placed the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷A large crowd of people was following him, including women who were mourning and wailing for him. ²⁸Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹Be sure of this: The days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never gave birth, and the breasts that never nursed.’ ³⁰Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us!’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ ³¹For if they do these things to the green wood, what will happen to the dry?”

³²Two other men, who were criminals, were led away with Jesus to be executed.

³³When they came to the place called The Skull, they crucified him there with the criminals, one on his right and the other on his left.

The Place of the Skull

If you were in Israel right now for Holy Week, you would probably find yourself on the Via Dolorosa—The Way of Sorrows. Thousands of people want to be there and trace the Savior’s final steps as he made his way to the cross.

On the Via Dolorosa you will find 14 so-called “stations of the cross.” It’s about a half mile, starting with Jesus’ condemnation by Pontius Pilate and finishing with his lifeless body being placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. Scripture doesn’t record the exact locations of these events, but tradition has claimed to establish the various “stations.”

Some of the events themselves aren’t recorded in Scripture, either. There’s a station where Veronica supposedly wiped the blood and sweat from Jesus’ face when he fell. There’s absolutely no Scriptural evidence for that event.

Today, on the Friday we call *Good Friday*, we walk the Via Dolorosa in spirit, using what little record we have from Luke’s Gospel account.

I. Simon helped him on the way.

“As they led him away, they seized Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country. They placed the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus” (Luke 23:26, EHV). “They” refers to the Roman soldiers assigned to supervise the Savior’s execution. How many crucifixions they did before that and how many after we simply don’t know. But we *do* know that the centurion and those assigned to guard Jesus were so moved by Jesus’ crucifixion that when he hung his head and died, they said: “Truly this was the Son of God” (Matthew 27:54, EHV).

I wonder if any of them felt that way hours earlier when: “They led him away” (Luke 23:26, EHV) from the stone pavement where Jesus stood in front of the crowds as Pilate announced: “Behold the man!” (John 19:5, EHV).

By that point Jesus must have made for a pretty pitiful sight. He had been brutalized by the guards, scourged, struck in the face, spit on, and mocked. For good measure, a crown of thorns had been pushed down onto his head and a purple robe draped over his bloodied back and shoulders. Rather than moving the crowds to mercy, as Pilate had hoped, it incited them to shout all the louder: “Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!” (John 19:15, EHV).

So that’s what they did. But the man who had been brutalized to within an inch of his life was too weak to walk that half-mile to the Place of the Skull while carrying the crossbeam on which he would hang.

How many times did our Lord stumble and fall? How many times did the guards prod

him back to his feet? Finally, they lost patience. Someone in the crowd of faces nearby looked strong enough to get this half-mile trip over with—Simon of Cyrene. Cyrene was a Greek city in Libya in North Africa. In 300 B.C. about 100,000 Jews had settled there. Simon was likely a Jew who had come to Jerusalem like so many other religious pilgrims to celebrate the Passover. In Mark's gospel we learn that Simon had a son named Rufus (Mark 15:21).

Peter would later write: "We were not following cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the powerful appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Peter 1:16, EHV). All these little details from the gospel writers show us exactly that. In his Letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul says: "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord" (Romans 16:13, EHV). The Bible doesn't specify anything about the Rufus Paul wanted to greet or the son of Simon of Cyrene. Could it be that the heartrending chore Simon performed that day led Simon and his family into Jesus' family of believers? If I remember when I get to heaven, that might be one many questions I have to ask.

II. The women wept over him.

I don't know if the crowds on Good Friday were the size of the Palm Sunday crowd, but I *do* know they mood was much different. Many of those following along simply wanted the ghoulish prospect of a front-row seat for a Roman execution.

Not all were there for the show. Not the "...women who were mourning and wailing for him" (Luke 23:27, EHV). How many women? We aren't told. How loud were they? Typically, Jewish wailing as an expression of grief was not the restrained grief many of us exhibit at funerals. In our culture, many tend to a rather subdued sobbing. If we can't, often we leave the room to let all the grief come out in a more private setting.

The wailing, however loud it was, was enough to get the Savior's attention. Jesus loved—selflessly, sacrificially, out of devotion to the Father. He was the only One who truly understood exactly what "love for your neighbor" was all about—even when dying the most agonizing death of all time.

"Jesus turned to them and said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹Be sure of this: The days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never gave birth, and the breasts that never nursed.' ³⁰Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' ³¹For if they do these things to the green wood, what will happen to the dry?'" (Luke 23:28-31, EHV). The Savior's heart was breaking—not because of what *he* was going through, but because of what *the lost* would go through. Jesus could see what was coming. In 70 A.D. the Romans destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the temple, as well as killing many of the people. Jesus knew what pain that event would cause those who would witness the destruction.

Jesus knew what was coming. The Romans were putting to death "the green wood," in other words, an innocent man—Jesus. If that could happen, how fierce would God's judgment be on the "dry wood" of unbelieving Jerusalem just a few years later?

How fierce and complete will God's righteous judgment be on all unbelievers at the Last Day! Pray for the dry wood that is all around us. Pray for yourself and your Christian family members and friends, because there's still dry wood in our sinful human nature, too.

III. Two criminals accompanied him.

"Two other men, who were criminals, were led away with Jesus to be executed. ³³When they came to the place called The Skull, they crucified him there with the criminals, one on his right and the other on his left" (Luke 23:32-33, EHV). The Roman government used the

horrific method of crucifixion to keep crime in check. Seeing others crucified would make most people not want to do crimes that would face such gruesome punishment. Crucifixion was for “criminals.” You didn’t get such a sentence for minor crimes; it was reserved for people thought to be truly “evil.”

Those are the kinds of people Jesus was crucified with—an evil criminal on either side of him. Isaiah said: “He let himself be counted with rebellious sinners” (Isaiah 53:12, EHV). He did it to be a substitute for rebellious sinners like you and me, with our stubborn streaks of self-righteousness.

Jesus allowed *his* name to be entered into the Lord’s judgment book in place of each of our names. Jesus, the only human being who was ever completely pure for his whole life, allowed himself to be counted as a criminal with criminals like you and me.

IV. He was crucified.

“When they came to the place called The Skull, they crucified him there with the criminals, one on his right and the other on his left” (Luke 23:33, EHV). Luke certainly doesn’t embellish things, does he? It’s almost as though the words lack any emotion.

Yet one word in that verse speaks volumes: crucified. Some have called it the most painful means of execution ever devised—so painful that many don’t want to hear the details of how someone died in crucifixion. The physical horrors of crucifixion are brutal. Without going into such details, crucifixion is a nightmare.

There was a much greater horror than that going on at the Place of the Skull, however. A brutality far greater than the physical tortures of being crucified on a cross. That day our Savior endured a torrential flood of punishment rained down on him by a holy God. He endured “The wages of sin” (Romans 6:23, EHV). All of God’s wrath. All of God’s punishment. All of God’s judgment. Not just for one person, but God’s judgment and wrath and punishment for the whole human race. Jesus endured it all.

This is the horror of the Friday we call Good. It had to be hell for Jesus, because that was what was necessary to bring heaven to you and me.

That’s why his final steps led to the Place of the Skull. Amen.