

The Gospel of Christ Jesus **A rejected Saviour - Luke 23:18-25**

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

My son has discovered a new favourite game. He likes to come to me and ask me to choose between two fairly unpleasant items. “Dad, would you rather be eaten by a crocodile or a killer whale?” “Would you rather eat a slug or a worm?” “Would you prefer to be chased by a tiger or a bear?”

I can almost guarantee, even before he asks me whatever question he’s just dreamt up, that I’d like to answer neither. I’d rather stay out of the water so no nasty things can eat me. I’d rather eat cakes than slugs or worms. I’m quite happy to see tigers and bears from a suitably safe distance. But apparently that answer is not allowed. I need to choose one of the options.

Let’s come to more serious matters. Sometimes we are faced with choices where all options seem to be bad to us. There are no good options. But that’s not always the case. As we continue our series about the Gospel of Christ Jesus today, we’re going to read from Luke chapter 23 verses 18-25. In these verses we find the people in Jerusalem faced with a choice. But it wasn’t a choice between two bad options. There was a clear good choice and a clear bad choice. Surprisingly however, there is almost unanimous agreement to choose the bad choice. That seems strange, doesn’t it? Let’s read the verses to pick up the story. We’ll start from verse 18 of Luke 23,

“And they all cried out at once, saying, “Away with this Man, and release to us Barabbas”— who had been thrown into prison for a certain rebellion made in the city, and for murder. Pilate, therefore, wishing to release Jesus, again called out to them. But they shouted, saying, “Crucify Him, crucify Him!” Then he said to them the third time, “Why, what evil has He done? I have found no reason for death in Him. I will therefore chastise Him and let Him go.” But they were insistent, demanding with loud voices that He be crucified. And the voices of these men and of the chief priests prevailed. So Pilate gave sentence that it should be as they requested. And he released to them the one they requested, who for rebellion and murder had been thrown into prison; but he delivered Jesus to their will.”

So what’s going on here? Perhaps you remember in last week’s Truth for Today message, we were presented with a faultless Saviour in the first part of Luke 23. Those verses described the Lord Jesus on trial before Pilate, the governor of Judea. Lots of false accusations were brought against Jesus. In verse 2 they said,

“We found this fellow perverting the nation and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, saying that He Himself is Christ, a King.”

Pilate concluded in verse 4,

“I find no fault in this Man.”

Pilate sent Jesus to Herod for a further interrogation. Herod found no fault with Jesus either and sent Him back to Pilate. Perhaps hoping to put an end to the matter, Pilate called the chief priests, the rulers and the people together and concluded in verse 14,

“Having examined Him in your presence, I have found no fault in this Man concerning those things of which you accuse Him; no neither did Herod.”

It's worth noticing here the testimony of two rulers of the day, who had no reason to favour Jesus. No fault in this Man!

Pilate thought he had a solution to the situation he found himself in. It was time for the feast of the Passover. That was why so many Jews had arrived in Jerusalem at that time. It was the reason, at least in one sense, why Jesus and His disciples were in Jerusalem. Apparently, there was a custom for one prisoner to be released by the ruling Roman authorities at Passover, perhaps as an act of leniency and mercy to the occupied nation. Since Pilate had decided that Jesus was innocent, he suggested that he would release Jesus to them. He would chastise Jesus first, which Pilate no doubt assumed might placate the chief priests and rulers who hated Jesus. But by releasing Jesus surely most of the ordinary people would be happy.

Let's just recap so that we're certain what has happened so far. Both Pilate and Herod had examined Jesus and decided that He had done nothing deserving of death. So it's surprising then, isn't it, that we arrive at the start of today's section of Luke 23, in verse 18, and find all the people crying out,

“Away with this Man, and release to us Barabbas.”

This is a bit of a surprise, isn't it? It's even more strange when we read in verse 19 that Barabbas had been thrown into prison for a rebellion and for murder. So the people were presented with a choice. Jesus, who went around doing good. He made blind people see; he made lame people walk. He fed 5000 people. He spoke so many wise things. Or they could choose Barabbas, the murderer and rebel. Even if you allow for some national pride and consider that the Jews may have viewed Barabbas' rebellion against the Romans rather differently to Pilate, this hardly seems a tough choice. Yet the people wanted Barabbas!

You can understand why Pilate was less than enthusiastic about letting a rebel murderer back out onto the streets. So in verse 20, we read that Pilate tried again to release Jesus. But the hostility against Jesus intensified and the people cried out, “Crucify Him, Crucify Him!” in verse 21. We need to just pause here and think about what happened. Just a few verses earlier Pilate had offered to chastise Jesus. Surely that would have been enough he thought. Wouldn't that have humiliated Jesus a bit and encouraged Him to stop embarrassing the chief priests? But the crowd had changed so quickly. Not only did they want Barabbas released to them, but they wanted Jesus to be crucified. That's quite a jump from chastising and telling off Jesus, isn't it? They wanted Him dead. And they wanted Him to endure the most gruesome of deaths!

Pilate was evidently quite surprised by this. In verse 22 he asked,

“Why, what evil has He done? I have found no reason for death in Him.”

Again he suggested that he chastise Jesus and let him go. Look at the crowd's response in verse 23,

“But they were insistent, demanding with loud voices that He be crucified.”

This wasn't just a few extremists in a crowd. The people, and the chief priests and the rulers, were all insistent.

In the end, Pilate gave in. He chose to give the people what they wanted. Verse 25 finishes our section for today with a striking summary of the whole situation,

“And he released to them the one they requested, who for rebellion and murder had been thrown into prison; but he delivered Jesus to their will.”

I started off today by talking about hard choices. I mentioned that sometimes we're asked to choose between two options, and neither is appealing. But that wasn't what happened here. The people had a choice between two people. Jesus or Barabbas. Barabbas was a murderer and a rebel. Jesus was the Son of God, the Deliverer the Jews had been waiting so many years for. And the people chose Barabbas. Jesus was rejected!

So what's going on in this section of Luke 23? What should we learn from it? The title of today's message is “A rejected Saviour.” Why is it that Jesus was rejected by these people in favour of a rebel like Barabbas?

It's really interesting to see how the rest of the Bible speaks of the rejection of Jesus. Consider these words of Peter, when he preached on the Day of Pentecost, perhaps 50 days or so after the verses we're considering today. You can read them in Acts 2, verses 22-24,

“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know – Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it.”

Peter said that when Jesus was rejected two things were actually happening. On the one hand, the people were rejecting Jesus. They took Jesus, and by the lawless hands of the Roman government, crucified Him. But on the other hand, God was behind it all. Jesus wasn't just rejected because the people hated Him. In fact, He was “delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God.” So, when we read the verses in Luke 23, we were surprised at the people's choice. Why would they choose the murderous rebel Barabbas, in preference to the faultless Saviour, Jesus? But God wasn't surprised by it. Everything was happening according to His plan.

The idea that the rejection of Jesus was both the responsibility of the people in Jerusalem, but also part of God's great plan of salvation was a key theme of Peter's early preaching in Acts. Consider his message by the Beautiful Gate of the temple in Solomon's porch in Acts 3:13-15,

“The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. But you

denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses.”

Once again, there's no escaping the guilt of the Jewish nation for their rejection of Jesus. They denied the Holy One in the presence of Pilate. They asked for a murderer and killed the Prince of life. Oh the irony! And yet, still there is a sense that God was at work. He glorified His Servant. He raised Jesus from the dead.

So we have to hold in balance these two strands of truth when we think about the rejection of Jesus. The Jews really did make an awful choice. They chose a murderer instead of the Prince of life. That really was a terrible choice. Jesus came into the world to save people, but in general, people did not want Him. They rejected Him. Please don't make the same mistake today! But let's reflect a little longer on the other side of things. That God had a plan that was at work. Reasonably often through the gospel accounts, the Lord Jesus predicted that he would be rejected. Consider the Lord's words in Luke 9:21-22,

“And He strictly warned and commanded them to tell this to no one, saying, “The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.””

You will find similar statements in Mark 8:31 and Luke 17:25. They emphasise that Jesus knew He would be rejected. But Jesus said something more than this during His ministry. Jesus said that His rejection was a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies. In Matthew 21:42, He drew the attention of the chief priests and the elders back to a prophecy in Psalm 118.

“Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes’?””

Once again, you can find similar verses in Mark 12:10, Luke 20:17 and Acts 4:11. Jesus made clear that His rejection was necessary. He needed to die. So that through His death He would accomplish something amazing. In Psalm 118, the rejected stone would become the foundation, the chief cornerstone, for a great building. Jesus said He was that rejected stone. He needed to be rejected and killed in order to bring about a way of salvation for all mankind.

We thought earlier about Peter's early preaching in Acts 2 and 3. In both of those chapters, Peter's aim wasn't to criticise and condemn the Jews for their rejection of Jesus, awful though it was. Peter's aim was to point out to his listeners that God had purpose in it all. Peter wanted to tell them that God was going to build something great out of the rejection of Jesus and the awfulness of the cross. So in Acts 2:38, after the people have been challenged by Peter's preaching and asked,

“What shall we do?”, Peter said, “Repent.”

The same thing happened again in Acts 3. In verse 19 Peter said,

“Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out.”

Peter was in effect saying, “Yes you did reject Jesus. But don't keep rejecting Him. God had a plan in it all. Jesus had to be rejected and die so that you could be forgiven for your sins. Don't keep on rejecting Jesus but repent and turn to Him.”

In Acts 2 and Acts 3, many people heard Peter's message and believed. They were saved. They received God's forgiveness. Sadly many of those who heard Peter still rejected Jesus. What about you today as we've been thinking about the rejected Saviour together? Have you been rejecting Jesus up until now? Don't continue! Jesus suffered the rejection we've been reading about in Luke 23.

In the remaining messages in this Truth for Today series over the coming weeks, we'll see Jesus move from Pilate's court to the cross. As we've seen briefly in Acts today, Jesus died to bear the judgement our sins deserved. He died so that we can be forgiven when we trust Him. If you know in your heart of hearts that you've been rejecting Jesus up until now, why not repent and turn to Jesus today? Ask Him to forgive you and thank Him for dying for you.

I suspect many of the listeners today are already believers. You're not rejecting Jesus anymore. Instead, you're grateful to Him for dying for you, and you're trying to serve Him however you can in your own circumstances. What lessons can believers draw from the passage we've considered in Luke 23 today? Why is it good for all of us to be reminded that Jesus is a rejected Saviour? How does trusting and serving a rejected Saviour impact on our lives? I'd like to finish off today by suggesting two challenges.

Firstly, Peter didn't only talk about Jesus as a rejected Saviour when he was preaching in the early chapters of Acts. When he later wrote his first epistle, he still drew lessons from the fact that Jesus was rejected. 1 Peter was written to Jewish Christians who had been scattered throughout many regions of the world as a result of persecution against Christians. In a very real sense they too were rejected, because of their Christian faith, so much so that they had had to leave their home towns. In 1 Peter chapter 2, Peter offered an invitation to those scattered Christians. Listen to verses 4-10,

“Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, “Behold, I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious, and he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame.” Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient, “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone,” and “A stone of stumbling and a rock of offence.” They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed. But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.”

In these verses Peter invited the scattered Christians to come to Christ. He reminded them that Jesus was rejected by men. But God had chosen Him, and to God, Jesus was precious. Peter reminded them that although they were rejected and scattered and persecuted because of their faith in Christ, they were being built up into a spiritual house on the foundation of Jesus Christ, the chief cornerstone. Peter was linking back to that prophesy in Psalm 118 again. Jesus was rejected, but it was necessary in order to build the church on the foundation of Jesus' work on the cross. Those Christians may also be rejected, but they were Christ's. He was available to them and should be even more precious to them. Let's remember from these verses in 1 Peter, that Christians are Jesus' own special people. To us He is precious! He has called us out of darkness and into His marvellous light. That's amazing! And a right response to this great truth, according to Peter, is that we should offer spiritual sacrifices to God. We should proclaim His praises. So let's challenge ourselves. As we've thought about Jesus today as a rejected Saviour, has it prompted

us to offer fresh praise and thanksgiving to Jesus for all He has done for us? As we're listening today, might the Spirit of God be prompting us to offer some new sacrifice, perhaps of praise, or of service in some way or other? How is the Lord challenging you to respond to Him today?

So my first challenge is whether we view the rejected Saviour as precious when we learn that He was rejected for our sakes and in order to save us. My second challenge comes from Hebrews 13. Let's read verses 12-17,

“Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here we have no continuing city, but we seek to one to come. Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.”

It might be that some listeners today are feeling rejected by those around them because of their faith. Maybe your friends or family dislike the fact that you're a Christian? Maybe your colleagues at work sneer at you because you are known to be a believer in Jesus Christ. May I encourage you today that this is in some sense a normal consequence of following a rejected Saviour. If the world largely reject Jesus, they will reject us too. That's what Hebrew's says. Jesus had to suffer “outside the gate.” That's a reference to His literal crucifixion outside the gates of Jerusalem. But it's also a pointer to His rejection. And Hebrews 13 challenges us to go to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach. It might be that we are rejected for being a Christian. I know that isn't nice or pleasant. But it's a reflection of the fact that the world largely rejects Jesus.

Hebrews 13 gives us some good, but challenging instructions, for the times we find ourselves rejected because we love Christ. The writer says we should keep on offering praise to God. Give thanks to Him. Keep on doing good wherever and whenever you have the opportunity. Keep on sharing, perhaps your possessions or your time. God knows it's a sacrifice. He sees you doing it, even if no one else does. And He is well pleased with it.

We believers might find ourselves rejected. The verses we've been considering in Luke 23 today teach us that Jesus knows what that feels like. He too was rejected, and a rebellious murderer was chosen instead. But we've seen that this was all necessary as part of God's great plan of salvation. Anyone can come to the rejected Saviour in repentance and find forgiveness of their sins. However, that might involve them being rejected by the world. But as believers get closer to Jesus, our rejected Saviour, we'll find, like Peter, that He is more and more precious!

May the Lord give each of us today a fresh appreciation of all the Lord did for us when He was despised and rejected by men, and may He teach us how precious He is, as we live for Him in our day by day lives.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on Luke 23:18-25, A Rejected Saviour, talk T1289.

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