

**“The Lifting Up of Jesus”**  
**Luke 23:26-49**  
**December 11, 2011**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Christmas is such a special occasion because in it we celebrate the fact that God has become man in the person of Jesus. Among other things, this means that God identifies with us in our suffering. He is not some distant God who remains untouched by human suffering. There is a branch of atheism known as “Protest Atheism” which argues that there cannot be a God because of the presence of so much evil and suffering in the world. This idea arose in the twentieth century in response to the large scale genocides associated with the Nazis and different Marxist regimes. Protest Atheism says, “We cannot believe in a God who stays safely in his heaven while all this suffering goes on. We cannot take that sort of God seriously. If he doesn’t know what it is like to suffer, he cannot know anything about us.”

The crucifixion shows that the God-man, Jesus, knows what it is to suffer. Though none of the gospel writers focuses on the gory details of death by crucifixion, we know enough of it to be shaken by its cruelty. Death by crucifixion was so horrific that it was illegal for a Roman citizen to be punished in this way. The condemned was usually flogged prior to his crucifixion. The instrument used in this consisted of various strands of leather with sharp metal or bones attached to the end. The purpose of this tip was to penetrate the skin and rip it off during the many blows. Then the victim would be forced to march in a parade of shame to the place of crucifixion. He would be made to carry the horizontal beam of his cross in this parade, whose route was mapped not by the shortest distance but by the one that would pass through the largest number of people. The idea was to make an example of the criminal, warning others not to follow his bad example. A placard was carried by someone at the head of this parade, on which was written the crime of the condemned. Luke tells us that Jesus’ placard read “This is the King of the Jews.” In other words, Jesus’ crime was treason against Rome.

After marching to the place of crucifixion, the horizontal beam was laid on the ground and the victim’s hands were nailed to it, and the wrists lashed to it to prevent the hands from tearing away when forced to support the weight of the body. Then this beam would be lifted up into a socket prepared for it on the vertical piece of the cross. Victims were crucified naked, to maximize shame and pain. Blistered by the sun during the day, and suffering without clothing by the cold of the night, there would be no relief from the pain. It sometimes took several days for death to come.

Jesus knows what it means to suffer. But his death is about more than his ability to identify with suffering people. If the message of the crucifixion is only that our God is acquainted with grief, then there's not much hope. Jesus not only identifies with suffering people, he transforms us as well. Jesus had said, **“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself”** (John 12:32). To make sure we don't miss the point, John adds that Jesus **“said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die”** (12:33). In this morning's passage, Luke reports three men who are drawn to Jesus and converted through his death on the cross. It is still the case that Jesus is drawing people to himself. If we would draw near to him this Christmas season, the way he has appointed is to do so through the cross. Let's look now at the three men transformed during the crucifixion.

## **I. Simon – An Unwanted Interruption**

It seems that Jesus' suffering is already taking a toll on him. When he is unable to carry the heavy crossbeam to the place of crucifixion, a man by the name of Simon is pressed into service to do so. Roman soldiers could conscript civilians into their service anytime they wanted. They did so by touching someone with the broad part of their spear, and Simon is conscripted in this fashion.

The Scriptures tell us a couple of things about this Simon. First, Luke reports that he is from Cyrene, a city known to us as Tripoli in Libya. So he is from a North African city very far from Jerusalem. How did he come to be in Jerusalem? Remember that it is Passover. For Jews who had grown up outside of Israel, their longing was to make it back to Jerusalem for Passover as often as they could. For someone as far away as North Africa, it is very possible that this was Simon's first trip to Jerusalem. Imagine his excitement as he planned and saved for this trip. Imagine also his anticipation during the long journey to Jerusalem. Jewish pilgrims would usually arrive just prior to Passover and stay until after Pentecost, fifty days later. So it is likely that Simon had only recently arrived in Jerusalem.

His stay in Jerusalem didn't turn out as he had imagined it in his mind. He found the city in an uproar over a Jewish rabbi named Jesus. On the very day of Passover, everyone is preoccupied with the fate of this man. Simon is curious and follows the crowd to the place where Jesus has been tried by Pilate. As he watches, Jesus is beaten and forced to carry his cross. Right in front of Simon Jesus stumbles and can't carry it any further. Before Simon can really take it all in, one of the soldiers accompanying Jesus then turns toward Simon, taps him with his spear and orders him to carry Jesus' cross for him. As this sad parade winds its way through the streets of Jerusalem toward Golgotha, Simon bears the weight of this cross as Jesus stumbles forward just

ahead of him. This was not the Passover he imagined, and it certainly wasn't the Passover he wanted.

Mark gives us a second piece of information about Simon, telling us that he is the father of Alexander and Rufus (15:21). Why would he include this information? People are normally identified with the name of their father, but Mark reverses this. Why? Probably because Alexander and Rufus were known to those Mark was writing. There is general agreement that Mark wrote his gospel to the Church at Rome, and Rufus and Alexander were probably members of that church. In his letter to the Romans, Paul refers to Rufus. **“Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well”** (Romans 16:13).

The most likely reason that Simon and his family members are named here is that he became one of the first ones to draw near to Jesus through the crucifixion. He saw Jesus stop to speak to the women who were mourning for him. Simon remembered how Jesus warned them of the judgment to come on the nation that was now rejecting its Messiah. The judgment will be so severe, he warned, that people would prefer to be buried alive than to experience it. They will say to the mountains, “Fall on us,” and to the hills, “Cover us” (v. 30). Either this man was a complete mad man or he was who he said he was. As he saw the rest of the events of that day unfold, he came to the settled conviction that this was no mad man. His life, and that of his family, was forever changed as a result of this unwanted interruption in his life. God still interrupts our lives to get us to see the Jesus who has been lifted up to draw men and women to himself.

## **II. The Thief – Hope in Jesus**

Jesus was crucified between two criminals, identified in Matthew and Mark as thieves. Isaiah had prophesied that the Messiah would be numbered with the transgressors, and it is here fulfilled in a literal way. Luke records that these thieves were witnesses of two things, but with different results in their lives. Both thieves witnessed Jesus' prayer: **“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”** (v. 34). Jesus was the opposite of Lamech, who had boasted about his revenge. He had killed a young man for striking him and announced that **“if Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold”** (Gen. 4:24). Jesus was the victim of great cruelty and responded with a prayer for God's blessing on his enemies. Such a response always gets our attention because it is so rare.

The second thing the thieves observed was the sustained mocking directed toward Jesus. The Jewish leaders started it, saying, **“He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!”** (v. 35). Since they were saying that in a mocking tone, their meaning was just the opposite of the

literal words. They were actually saying, “You think you’re so great, healing all those people during your lifetime. You have even claimed to be the Messiah. Well if you’re really the Messiah, then save yourself. Oh, you can’t do so. See, we knew all along you weren’t the Messiah.” The soldiers made their contribution to the mocking, even offering him cheap, sour wine. It was a derisive offer, as if they were saying, “Jesus, if you’re a king, you should be drinking wine. Here, King Jesus, have some wine.” Mockery easily spreads, and it spread to one of the thieves hanging next to Jesus. “Aren’t you the Messiah? Go ahead and save yourself; and while you’re at it, save us too.”

At any moment, Jesus could have saved himself. But he could not have done what the mocking thief asked him to do, save both himself and others. He could save others by refusing to save himself, or save himself by turning his back on others. By God’s grace, the other thief seemed to have an awareness of this, and asks Jesus to save him. The specific form of his request was to ask Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom. That’s an amazing request. He believed that Jesus was truly a king, and he believed that there would be a kingdom for Jesus to come into after his death. Jesus responds, **“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise”** (v. 43). Paradise is another name for heaven during what theologians call the “intermediate state.” This is the state after death but before the resurrection of the dead at the return of Jesus. It is not a state of soul sleep, but one that Paul referred to as the third heaven where we he saw things so glorious that they could not be uttered on the earth (2 Cor. 12:2-3).

The thief was transformed when hope was born in his heart by seeing Jesus as the man for others. Jesus had prayed for forgiveness for his enemies, and he had refused to save himself in order to save others. In the early 1900s, William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, wanted to send a Christmas message to all Salvation Army workers around the world. The only means of sending messages quickly over great distances in that day was to do so by telegraph. But Western Union charged by the word, and Booth was a frugal man. So he reduced his message to one word that he thought summarized the meaning of Christmas. So all Salvation Army workers that year received a telegram from William Booth with only one word on it: “Others.” His workers embodied this message. In 1914, 109 Salvation Army officers died when *The Empress of Ireland* sank after being struck by another ship on the St. Lawrence River. None of the Salvation Army workers were wearing life jackets. Survivors told how the Salvation Army officers, when they saw other passengers without lifejackets, removed their own and strapped them upon the others.

### **III. The Centurion – A New Worshipper**

Roman centurions were so named because they were officers given charge of one hundred soldiers. There was one present at Jesus’ crucifixion. Such a

man would have seen death many times, but he had never seen one like this. Luke records three things happening, at least two of which the centurion would have witnessed. First, darkness covered the land for three hours, from the sixth hour to the ninth. This would correspond to the hours of noon to 3:00 p.m. on our clocks. It has been pointed out by others that at Jesus' birth there was brightness at midnight, while at his death there was darkness at noon. Jesus is the light of the world, and where Jesus is there is light. Now that he is being removed, there is darkness.

The second thing that happens is the tearing of the curtain's temple. The centurion would not have seen this, but he may have heard of it. The curtain referred to is the one covering the Holy of Holies in the temple. This was the inner sanctum of the temple, into which only the High Priest was permitted to go once a year, on the Day of Atonement. It was the place where God's presence dwelled. Matthew and Mark both record the unusual fact that this curtain was torn from top to bottom. The clear meaning is that the barrier between sinful men and a holy God is removed through the death of Jesus. The darkness at noon and the tearing of the temple curtain testify to the significance of this event. God the Father renders his verdict on the death of the Son. Jesus is innocent, and the death of the innocent Son of God opens heaven's door for all time.

The third thing that happens just before the death of Jesus is his prayer of faith. **"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!"** (v. 46). The centurion was not used to seeing people die with such calmness. Jesus trusted the Father to the end.

The hard heart of the centurion was softened by these things. He became of worshipper of God, becoming convinced like so many others, that Jesus died an innocent man. The lifting up of Jesus has changed him forever.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Jesus had said, **"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself"** (John 12:32). If you will be drawn closer to Jesus this Christmas, it will be through his lifting up on a cross. Jesus was lifted up for you. He died the most shameful death, naked and mocked by so many. He could have ended it at any time, but persevered to the very end. He did so for you, the innocent for the guilty. Let these three men show you how to draw near to Jesus in his death. Perhaps there are in your life, like there were in Simon's, unwanted interruptions. Let those draw you to Jesus. Let the thief show you the need to see Jesus as the King who can take us safely into paradise, no matter how bleak things may look. And let the centurion soften your heart to praise God as you see the Father's acceptance of Jesus' death as the death to end all death and permanently open the path to God.