

March 20, 2016 “What Did He Say?” Luke 23:44-49

People say a lot of things when they are dying. Some enter delirium. Raving madness was often a part of the crucifixion of criminals in Roman held Judea. Some lived and suffered for a week. The Romans kept statistics. The Roman centurion reported to superior officers and from time to time, to the Procurator, himself. Paper work even back then was part of running an Empire. One of the miracles of the crucifixion of Jesus, is the speed with which Jesus died. What I mean by miracle in this case, is this. As Jesus told Pilate, this process is in the hands of our Father in heaven, no matter what the chain of human command would tell us. What that means is that in spite of the beatings Jesus received, the whipping...40 brutal, blood letting lashes meant to tear flesh...the crown of thorns...all of what Luke has described and witnessed, Jesus tasted mercy, the mercy of God, in the brevity of the time on the cross. He died quickly. Not so, the two criminals crucified with Him.

Why is this insight important? It goes to the heart of what Luke is sharing with us. It goes to the heart of Matthew's telling of the crucifixion. And young Mark's, a relative of Peter. It goes to the heart of what John shares with us about the cross and the death of Jesus upon it. They are all in their own and individual ways making the point that God and not Pilate is in charge as these things occur, as Jesus is made to suffer...at the hands of men, soldiers, officers, government. They are telling us, these gospel writers, Luke among them, that God by this means is saving people from their sins, from their failure to be righteous, from their missing the mark. And all of the details, all of the details, point to the singular truth, that this is no “ordinary” crucifixion, no ordinary death, that Jesus is no ordinary man. He is singular.

The sun stopped shining. There are those who say, so what? Eclipse of the sun is a natural phenomena. There are those who say, Who says? What they mean is, prove it! “Except you give hard evidence that Luke is not just trying to sell us something, I will not believe it.” The curtain in the Temple was torn in two. So what? All that proves is that Judea was a place like our own where vandalism occurs all the time. And acts of vandalism, or criminality are certainly consistent with the nature of human beings. Even in the iron grip of the Roman Empire.

What I am getting at is this: You and I can try until the cows come home...until supper time or early evening, the end of the day...the chances that by sheer argument, or human logic we will change minds so that people will suddenly come to faith in our precious Lord, in Jesus, are slim. So what is Luke doing in this effort of his to bring the gospel to His excellency, Theophilus? I will tell you, because the fact is we stand in the shoes of Luke more certainly than we do the shoes of Peter. Luke is trying to leverage the one thing he has where Theophilus is concerned. Luke knows, that Theophilus finds him a credible witness. Truthful. He was there. Saw and heard with his own eyes and ears in most cases. Tested the waters of credibility with his own good mind and sensibleness when it came to the rest. Being of sound mind and body...not crazy...not an extremist...not swept up in emotion and yet passionate about the details he shares, because he is telling the truth. There are people you know, who know you, for whom you are (whether you believe it or not) the most credible witness on earth ...to the reality of God, and salvation found through faith in Jesus, at the the foot of the cross.

Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” And when Jesus said this, he stopped breathing.

3.

He stopped bleeding. His heart stopped. His brain, deprived of oxygen and blood shut down. Jesus died. Early in the afternoon, Jesus died. Why is all of this so important? Did you notice...Pontius Pilate certainly did...throughout every detail of this process, Jesus is either silent, or He speaks about the fact of God's presence and the reality of God's power. When Pilate lost patience with Jesus unwillingness to converse, Pilate reminded Jesus he had the power to execute Him. What did Jesus say? "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above." And even Pilate understood Jesus was not referring to Caesar in Rome, but to God in heaven.

In the midst of the reviling comments from the crowd, one of the criminals defended Jesus who was so obviously innocent where the law was concerned. What did Jesus say? "Today you will be with me in paradise." It was a promise made on the basis of something that criminal understood. Dying beside Jesus, that criminal could taste two realities. The closeness of eternity. And that he was in the presence of divinity. That criminal, dying for killing people, pronounced, "He (that is Jesus) has done nothing wrong...while we are getting what we deserve. Remarkable. He said, we deserve to die. Jesus on the other hand has done nothing wrong. Nothing. There are a lot of things you could accuse that dying criminal of ... but this is certain. He knew a thing or two about innocence and the lack of innocence. "Jesus has done nothing wrong!"

These details are important because they lead us to another detail. Jesus committed his spirit into His Father's care and keeping and then he breathed his last. He died. And that leads to Luke's telling us, the centurion praised God and said, "Surely this was a

4.

righteous man.” Mark 15:39 says, “And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard His cry and saw how He died, he said, “Surely this man was the Son of God!” Matthew 27:54 says, “When the centurion and those who were with him who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake, and all that had happened, they were terrified, and (they) exclaimed, 'Surely He was the Son of God!’” Matthew and Mark put exclamation marks at the conclusion of the centurion's and the soldiers comments regarding Jesus... “Surely He was the Son of God!” John does not relate anything regarding the centurion or the soldier's words. He describes how they killed the two criminals by breaking their legs, and that they did not break Jesus legs because He was already dead.

So what did the centurion and/or the soldiers actually say? If we acknowledge the context, the circumstances in which they are believed to have spoken...it is very clear, the centurion at least, and the soldiers too were moved, impressed by the sudden coming together of a number of impressive circumstances. That is the very least one would say. It is significant that the KJV tells us Matthew and Mark's text include the word truly. “Truly He was the Son of God.” Luke 23, uses the word certainly...certainly this was a righteous man. Remember Luke wanted Theophilus to know of the certainty of what he has been told concerning Jesus who is the Christ of God. So the KJV introduces that we may be certain Jesus was a righteous man. That the truth is He was the Son of God. Truth.

John Calvin in dealing with these texts in Matthew, Mark and Luke says this...all three mean the same thing, because it was universally known that the main charge against Jesus with the Sanhedrin, was that He claimed to be the Son of God. Believe me, I hesitate to disagree with the learned Reformer who deals with the

Scripture as He finds it. But here is the question. Do they mean the same thing? Truth...He was the Son of God! Certainty...He was a righteous man. What does it mean to be the Son of God. Well, among other things it means divinity. And therefore it also means perfection. Sinlessness. Holiness. And what does it mean if it appeared “certain” that He was a righteous man? Well it means that unlike the balance of humanity He was innocent. Without sin. A holy man. It becomes easy to see how the great Reformer concludes...they mean the same thing. And there is another detail to throw into the mixing bowl.

Luke says the centurion, “Praised God and said, Surely this was a righteous man.” And I made sure I checked that out in the KJV which I claim is still the most accurate, word for word translation of the Hebrew and the Greek and Aramaic original documents into our language English. The KJV says this: “Now when the centurion saw what was done, he glorified God, saying, Certainly. This was a righteous man.” Do you know where we find that phrase glorified God in the Gospel of Luke? We find it in Luke 2:20. The shepherds have left their flocks and go to Bethlehem to see what the angels have told them they would find. And seeing the infant Christ with Mary and Joseph, “the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.” (Luke 2:20 KJV) This is pretty impressive stuff. The officer (the centurion) and his military detail (the soldiers that were with him to guard Jesus) did not swear. They at least momentarily recognized that God was at work here. That someone who was holy, (yup) the Son of God (yes) has just been executed. And they or perhaps he (the centurion) have been involved.

That's what the officer said. That's what Luke tells

6.

Theophilus he witnessed. At a time and in a moment when Peter and Matthew and John have not yet recognized that these things are true. The disciples are shattered. One of them is off working up the courage to commit suicide. One of them is about to scream, "I never knew the man!" The centurion is a Gentile...a foreigner. The personification of the enemy of the natives of Judea.

What did he say? Truth...He was the Son of God.
Certainty...without sin. Holy, holy, holy.

Let us pray;

O God...there it is. He died not for His sin. But for ours. For theirs. For mine. And the eyes of a man who did not pretend to believe, saw it. And the tongue of man who did not pretend to be a believer proclaimed it. Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Shepherded us in the midst of our waywardness. Amen