

## The Hill to Die On

Luke 23:26-33

Manuscript and Discussion Guide for November 3, 2024

Stephen Davey

As the narrative of Scripture arrives at the moment that will become the defining moment of the gospel and the Christian faith, we are reminded that the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual suffering Jesus' experienced leading up to and on to the cross is almost incomprehensible to our human understanding. We also see how God orchestrated a moment into the narrative that becomes a poignant symbol for all of humanity's relationship to Jesus.

Today we arrive in our exposition of the Gospel of Luke to sacred ground—a hill outside the city of Jerusalem where the greatest transaction in human history will take place between God the Father and God the Son.

Luke refers to the hill as ***"The Skull."*** The Greek word is *kranion*, which gives us our word "cranium" or "skull." We're not exactly sure why the hill earned this nickname; perhaps this rocky hilltop resembled a skull at some point in time.

The Aramaic word for skull is *Golgotha*, which Matthew, Mark and John use in their account.

The Latin word for skull is *calvaria*, which gives us the word that will be adopted by the church as the primary term for this hill—this sacred ground called Calvary. This is the hill Jesus must die on. This is the place where Jesus will become the climactic—the final—Passover Lamb.

This is such a momentous event that I have struggled with how fast to move through it, and where and when to pause.

Frankly, I could preach from this chapter for the rest of my life and never reach the bottom of this deep well of truth and grace and glory.

This scene is both horrifying and healing. It represents our sin and our salvation, our guilt and our eternal guarantee.

This is where we will be shown in living color that ***“God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten (His unique) Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life.”***

This is the place where the last Lamb will be sacrificed, where the sinless Lamb will die for sinful humanity, where death paves the way to everlasting life.

This is the place where the flames of God’s wrath against sinners are extinguished by the blood of the Lamb.

Now, following the prisoner exchange of Jesus Barabbas for Jesus the Christ, Pilate sends Jesus to be scourged by Romans soldiers.

Matthew’s Gospel records next that Jesus is sent by Pilate to be scourged. This may have been one last attempt to satisfy the growing mob who wanted the death of Jesus, even though Pilate had tried to get Jesus released.

But even this won’t work.

During the days of Christ, this horrific beating was commonly referred to as the “half-way death.”

Charles R. Swindoll, *The Darkness and the Dawn* (Word Publishing, 2001), p. 100

Many of its victims slipped into a state of shock; it was not unusual for some to die while being scourged.

Now I’m not trying to be graphic for the sake of sensationalism, but I don’t want to sanitize this event either. This is all included in the suffering of the Final Lamb.

Before scourging, the victim would be stripped of his clothing and then bound to a low stone post. The men who administered this beating were known as “lictors,” which is where we get our expression, “he took a licking.”

Scourging was the standard practice that preceded crucifixion. Typically, two Roman soldiers trained in this practice took turns alternating their blows.

They used a whip called a flagellum, which had a short wooden handle and long leather straps. The straps were braided in varying lengths, and pieces of sheep bone and small pieces of iron were sewn into these long straps.

Several years ago, a detailed report on the medical aspects of the scourging and crucifixion of Jesus was published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. It describes the scourging as follows:

As the Roman soldiers repeatedly struck the victim's back with full force, the [metal] and sheep bone would cut into the skin and underlying tissues. As the flogging continued, the lacerations would tear into the underlying skeletal muscles and produce ribbons of bleeding flesh. Pain and blood loss generally set the stage for circulatory shock. The extent of blood loss may well have determined how long the victim would survive on the cross.<sup>1</sup>

There's no doubt that Jesus endured a most terrible beating, given the fact that these Roman soldiers were demonically inspired to hurt Jesus; they also hated the Jews.

Matthew tells us that more than just a couple of soldiers went out to this plot of ground used for scourging; Matthew tells us that the entire battalion shows up (**Matthew 27:27**).

They're all going to get in on mocking this "King of the Jews." Some of them have evidently gathered some thorns to add to the pain and insult of the accusation against Jesus.

These particular thorns would have been 6 inches long or more; they were common in this region. They were snipped off and then put into baskets to dry. They would be used as kindling to start fires. Public places would offer large receptacles stocked with these thorn branches and vines. Some soldiers had already gone out, grabbed some of them and plaited together a wreath of thorns to shove onto Jesus' head.

Adapted from Swindoll, p. 103

**Matthew describes it all here in chapter 27 and verse 28:**

*And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand.*

*Matthew 27:28-29a*

By the way, this scarlet robe they put on Him as they mocked His claim of royalty wasn't a long robe you might see in classic paintings or renderings.

The Greek word used here refers to a short cloak that was worn by high-ranking military personnel, as well as kings and emperors. It was more like wrap that covered the shoulders, was held in place by a button at the neck, or a tie of some sort, never extending lower than the elbows.

Swindoll, p. 102

---

<sup>1</sup> William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, and Floyd E. Hosmer, "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 255 (April 1986), 11:1457.

So, Jesus has been stripped naked to add to His humiliation; this wrap is now put around His shoulders which doesn't reach past His stomach; a reed has been put in His hand to mimic a royal scepter and this crown of thorns has been jammed down upon His head.

**Matthew records next:**

*And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"  
And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. And  
when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own  
clothes on him and led him away to crucify him.*

*Matthew 27:29b-31*

And what's Jesus doing during all of this? Dealing with searing pain, blood running down His face and off His back and down His legs, what's He doing? He's standing there quietly, besides perhaps groaning in pain. He's standing here ***"as a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth"* (Isaiah 53:7).**

Perhaps He was looking down the corridor of history to that moment when every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that He is Lord.

Now at this point, as Jesus begins walking to Calvary, Luke introduces us to a bystander who suddenly becomes a key player. **Luke writes in verse 26:**

*And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was  
coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind  
Jesus.*

*Luke 23:26*

The Gospel accounts never mention Jesus falling while trying to drag His cross through the streets and up the hill. In fact, no crucifixion victim carried their cross—which would have weighed more than 300 pounds—they carried the cross beam.

Evidently, the centurion knew that Jesus would not be able to carry anything, so he drafts a man standing there by the name of Simon.

And there's a little irony here, beloved, because you immediately wonder where the other Simon was at the moment, the Simon Peter who declared that he would die with Jesus rather than deny Him.

Well, this Simon here is from Cyrene. Because he's mentioned by name, he became well known to the church. **Mark's Gospel** even tells us that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus, another detail that suggests Mark had met them and knew them by name.

Add to that the fact that when the apostle Paul concluded his letter to the Romans, he greeted Rufus, and then made a special commendation to the mother of Rufus, in **Romans 16:13**, and mentions that she was a special member of the believing community.

The evidence suggests that Simon of Cyrene becomes a believer in Christ.

One author writes, “Apparently Simon and his wife and two sons became well-known Christians who were held in honor in the church.”

Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Courageous (Victory Books, 1989), p. 133

Simon has traveled to Jerusalem from Cyrene, a Roman district in the modern nation of Libya. A large number of Jews had settled there 300 years before Jesus was born.

Attending Passover in Jerusalem was on the bucket list of every devoted Jew. They wanted to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem at least once in their lifetime.

Simon lives 800 miles away from Jerusalem. We don’t know if this was his first visit; we do know that this will be his most significant visit. He’s arrived at last, he’s joined this growing crowd buzzing with the news of a Jewish man condemned to be crucified.

Suddenly, Simon feels the flat edge of a Roman sword on his shoulder, and that was legal conscription into Roman service. He’s told to carry the cross of this condemned man.

So here comes this procession—get the real picture in your mind: a Roman soldier would have been carrying a placard, called a titulus, which detailed the victim’s crime. The placard, most often made of wood, was attached to a pole and held high so everyone could read why the condemned was going to be crucified. It will be attached to the cross later on.

It simply read: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” John chapter 19 says that Pilate ordered it to be written in three languages:

- Hebrew, the language of the Jewish people.
- Latin, the language of the Roman empire.
- Greek, the language of the known world.

Pilate knew that this message would infuriate the Jewish leaders; in fact, they had tried to get him to change it. But he had refused.

So that soldier carrying the titulus would have been leading the procession. This was a very public event, and the streets would have been packed with people.

Following the Roman soldier carrying the titulus would be the victim, usually carrying the crossbeam.

Now follow this: bearing the crossbeam to the hill of crucifixion communicated to the public at large the condemned person's personal guilt. But Jesus wasn't dying because *He* was guilty. Mankind was guilty. So, in a sense, Simon becomes a representative of guilty humanity.

And here's Jesus walking behind the banner that declares who He really is— "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" —in three languages.

I guess you could say that titulus was the first gospel tract, and get this, it was composed by a pagan politician.

It's just one more reminder that God is overruling the rulers of the world in every generation and in every country.

And that's a good reminder for our upcoming election this week. God is in control.

Now, you ought to exercise your stewardship in this country as a citizen, this is a dignified way to speak your mind by casting your vote. But don't lose hope; God is overruling the rulers. He isn't going to stay up late on Tuesday night stressing to see if His agenda can somehow continue moving forward.

God had a pagan governor spell out the gospel in three languages, free of charge.

***Now with that, Luke introduces us to some additional bystanders here in verse 27:***

*And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. But turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"*

*Luke 23:27-31*

These women alongside the road are weeping over the injustice of one man's death, but Jesus looks ahead to the coming destruction of Jerusalem.

The nation Israel was like a green tree during the years of Jesus' ministry. It was a time of blessings and miracles and spiritual opportunity. Warren Wiersbe writes, "but the nation rejected their Messiah and became like a dry tree, fit for the fire of judgment."

That judgment predicted by the Lord will arrive when the city is besieged by the Roman General, Titus. The people will begin starving to death; they will cannibalize their children; eventually the city will be overtaken, and Titus will crucify thousands of people and destroy the temple and much of the city.

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian wrote that Titus stopped crucifying the vanquished Jews only because he ran out of wood.

Jesus grieves over the nation that has rejected Him.

Now, eventually this procession reaches Golgotha—the Skull. **Luke writes here in verse 32:**

*Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.*

*Luke 23:32-33*

Crucifixion originally referred to nailing someone to a tree, or to an upright stake. The Greek word for “tree” and “wood” is the same word.

Eugenia Scarvelis Constantinou, The Crucifixion of the King of Glory (Ancient Faith Publishing, 2021), p. 212

It was invented by the Persians because they worshipped Ormuzd, the god of earth. They didn't want to contaminate the earth, their god, with a victim touching the earth when he died for his crimes.

Swindoll, p. 115

They typically nailed the victim to a stake in the ground.

The practice traveled to other lands and throughout the centuries until the Romans adapted it and changed a few things about it to make the victim suffer even longer.

In fact, it became such a horrific way to die that Cicero, the Roman orator, once said, “the very word ‘cross’ should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes, and his ears. The very mention of the word is unworthy of a Roman citizen.”

Constantinou, p. 219

If anything, it became the ultimate curse you could verbalize to someone. In our generation, the phrase, “Go to hell” is an unkind expression used to demean or disrespect someone.

But in the first century, that would be nothing compared to the idea of wanting someone to be crucified.

Crucifixion was the ultimate curse upon someone, it represented the worst defilement, a total loss of reputation, and public shame at its worst level.

Discovered in Pompeii was graffiti written on a wall that said, “Be crucified!”

Ibid, p. 219

The word “crucifixion” means, “fixed to a cross.” The Latin verb means “to torture.” And it was indeed designed to be a slow, painful, humiliating, death.

But for Jesus, you need to understand that crucifixion was necessary, not because it was painful, but because it represented rejection by God.

First century Jews regarded crucifixion as a hanging, which meant that the victim was rejected by God.

***The law, written in Deuteronomy 21:22-23***, declared that someone hanging on a tree was cursed by God. In other words, he was declared to be rejected by God.

This is why the Sanhedrin—the Jewish leaders—were determined to have Jesus crucified. Even though they typically wanted to stone blasphemers to death, they wanted this ultimate penalty, and that’s because nothing surpassed crucifixion as a statement of guilt.

Ibid, p. 221

If they could crucify Jesus, it would be irrefutable proof that He wasn’t just a blasphemer, but utterly rejected by God.

Ibid

The apostle Paul had that in mind when he wrote to the ***Galatians in chapter 3 and verse 13:***

*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—  
for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.”*

*Galatians 3:13*

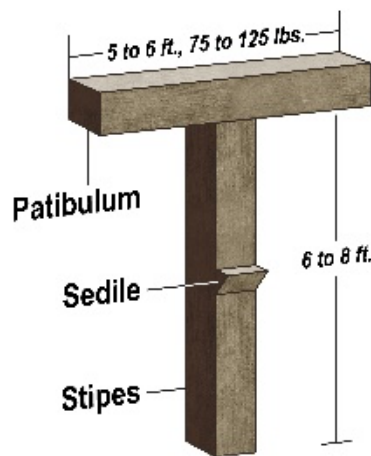
And that’s what the leaders wanted to communicate.

There was no way Jesus was the King of the Jews; there was no way Jesus was the Messiah; there was no way Jesus was the Son of God. Look at that hill He died on.

He was crucified. Case closed. End of story! And to this world, it would indeed be the end of the story.



Now let me pull over and correct the mental picture many people have of this scene.



A Roman cross weighed around three hundred pounds or more. The victims did not drag a three-hundred-pound cross hundreds of yards and then up a hill—especially those who were already suffering from the blood-loss and pain of scourging.

We know from both Jewish and Roman historians that the vertical piece of the cross was already installed in the ground. It was called the **stipe**; it was permanently anchored at the site of execution.

We also know from history that thousands of people were crucified during Jesus' lifetime—this was Rome's favorite form of execution.

Jesus would have been carrying the crossbeam, the horizontal bar called the **patibulum**.

The Romans would place the beam on the victim's shoulders and often tie the beam to his outstretched arms. The horizontal piece typically weighed between 75 and 125 pounds.

The condemned victim would carry that beam to the site of crucifixion, and after walking some distance, you can imagine how he would struggle under the weight.

The cross was constructed with a **mortice and tenon joint**. In other words, the crossbeam had a hole in the center of it so that it would slip down onto the vertical beam.

When the victim arrived at the crucifixion site, the crossbeam would be placed on the ground, and the condemned man would lie down on the ground on his back. His hands would be nailed to that crossbeam.

Recent discoveries and historical research indicate that **the nail** would have begun at the upper part of the hand, directly across from the thumb, and then nailed in an upward angle so that the nail exited at the victim's wrist, as is was nailed to the cross-beam.

The soldiers would then lift the victim up on his feet and raise his arms and the crossbeam up and slip the patibulum up and over the stipe—the vertical beam.

There's one piece of the cross that is typically left out, and I think tragically so. It was called the **sedile**, or “the saddle.” It was a block of wood upon which the victim perched, just enough wood to rest upon. This enabled the soldiers to draw up the knees of the victim and place his feet flat upon the vertical beam.

They would then nail each foot to the beam.

Later in Luke's account, Jesus will show the disciples his hands and feet, which implies that both hands and both feet were nailed individually.

This saddle also allowed the victim to live for quite some time. One Bible scholar, the late Merrill Unger, wrote that instances have been found in historical records of people surviving for nine days on the cross.”

Swindoll, p. 115

Again, the cross was designed to be the slowest and most painful way to die.

Now, if the Romans needed the cross for someone else, they could push the victim off the saddle and break his legs, which would make it impossible for him to rise up to inhale and exhale properly and he would die within a few minutes.

Another mental picture that needs correcting here, beloved, is that the cross isn't a tall, lower case “t” shaped cross, stretching 12 feet in the air.

The Romans employed a cross no more than 6-8 feet high. This allowed people to come by and curse the victim to their face, spit at him, and mock him. And that's what happened to Jesus.

Many victims would die simply because they were attacked by wild animals during the night. One historian wrote that vultures would circle above the scene of a crucifixion, waiting for the crowd to leave.

The apostle Paul wrote in **Philippians 2** of the humility of Christ and His willingness to be obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross, as if to say, “if you can believe it—even that kind of death—death on a cross!”

He had to be crucified. He would fulfill the law by becoming accursed by God on our behalf, bearing the curse of sin.

I often think of that singular illustration when Princess Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh were married in 1947; the streets and parks of London were packed with people jostling for a glance at the royal carriage and the newly married couple.

Royalty and dignitaries from around the world had arrived as well. King Faisal II, the 12-year-old King of Iraq, was there among the crowd; he had refused to wear his royal apparel, and he wasn't interested in a wedding; he wanted to see the horses and soldiers.

When he pushed his way through a line of policemen to get a better view of the parade, he was handled roughly. That is, until they found out who he was. The next day the newspaper headline apologized with these words: **"We did not know who you were!"**

That's Jesus Christ—only a million times more significant. He was unrecognized, mistreated, mocked and ultimately crucified for the sin of the world—the sin of that Jewish nation who rejected Him, the sin of those political leaders who unjustly tried Him, the sin of every person, including you and me today.

He was willing to be rejected on earth so you and I would never be rejected in heaven. That is, for those who've come to Calvary and trusted His death for their life: He suffered for their salvation.

The foot of this cross touched earth, as if to declare that God has moved from heaven to earth to touch mankind; the arms of the cross stretch outward as if to say, "whosoever will may come."

So have you trudged up that hill He died on? That hill He chose to die on, have you come to Him? Well then, He's coming for you, one day! Either through death or the rapture of the church.

He's coming for those who've accepted the invitation of the cross, who have knelt and confessed that Jesus Christ is Lord.

---

© Copyright 2020 Stephen Davey  
All rights reserved.

Access the complete archive of Stephen Davey's teaching ministry at  
**wisdomonline.org** or on the **Wisdom for the Heart app**.

# Study Guide

## Summary:

In this sermon, we explore the profound and sacred events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, as depicted in the Gospel of Luke. The sermon takes us to Calvary, the hill where Jesus, the final Passover Lamb, was sacrificed for the sins of humanity. It delves into the physical and spiritual suffering Jesus endured, highlighting the brutal scourging and mocking He faced before His crucifixion. The sermon also introduces Simon of Cyrene, who was compelled to carry Jesus' cross, symbolizing humanity's shared guilt. The narrative emphasizes the significance of Jesus' crucifixion, not just as a painful death, but as a necessary act of divine rejection, fulfilling the law and bearing the curse of sin. The sermon concludes with a call to recognize Jesus' sacrifice and to accept the invitation of the cross, ensuring eternal acceptance in Heaven.

## Key Takeaways:

- Calvary is not just a geographical location but a spiritual landmark where the greatest transaction in human history occurred. It is where Jesus, the sinless Lamb, was sacrificed for the sins of humanity. This event is a profound reminder of God's immense love and the depth of His grace, offering us eternal life through the ultimate sacrifice of His Son.
- The physical and emotional torment Jesus endured before and during His crucifixion underscores the gravity of sin and the extent of His love for us. His silent endurance amidst mockery and pain fulfills the prophecy of the suffering servant in Isaiah, demonstrating His obedience and willingness to bear our sins.
- Simon's unexpected involvement in carrying Jesus' cross symbolizes the shared guilt of humanity. It serves as a reminder that while Jesus bore the weight of our sins, we are called to take up our cross and follow Him, participating in His suffering and sharing in His mission of redemption.
- Jesus' crucifixion was not only a physical ordeal but a spiritual necessity. By being crucified, He became a curse for us, fulfilling the law and demonstrating that He was rejected by God on our behalf. This act of divine rejection ensures that those who believe in Him will never be rejected in Heaven.
- The cross stands as an eternal invitation to all who seek salvation. Its arms stretch wide, symbolizing the inclusive call to "whosoever will, may come." Accepting this invitation means acknowledging Jesus as Lord and embracing the promise of eternal life, assured that He will come for those who have placed their trust in Him.

## Discussion Guide

### Bible Reading:

- Luke 23:26-33

### Observation Questions:

1. How does the Gospel of Luke describe Simon of Cyrene's involvement in the crucifixion narrative?
2. What actions did the Roman soldiers take to mock Jesus, and how did He respond according to the sermon?
3. What does the inscription "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" signify, and in what languages was it written?

### Interpretation Questions:

1. What is the symbolism of Simon of Cyrene carrying Jesus' cross, and what does it represent for humanity?
2. In what ways is Jesus' crucifixion a fulfillment of the law and a demonstration of divine rejection?
3. How does Isaiah 53:7 relate to Jesus' silent endurance during His suffering?
4. What is the significance of the cross being described as an "eternal invitation," and how does it relate to the concept of salvation?

### Application Questions:

1. Reflect on the idea of Calvary as a spiritual landmark. How can you make the sacrifice of Jesus more central in your daily life?
2. Simon of Cyrene's unexpected role in carrying the cross symbolizes shared guilt. How can you actively participate in Jesus' mission of redemption in your community?
3. The cross is described as an invitation to salvation. Have you fully accepted this invitation, and how does it influence your relationship with Jesus?
4. Consider the mockery and suffering Jesus endured. How can you show gratitude for His sacrifice in your interactions with others?