

Calvary

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Date: 26 June 2016

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[0 : 0 0] Really this whole passage that we have read today speaks to us of our subject matter. If we were to focus on one particular text or one particular verse, then perhaps it would be summed up in the most obvious one in verse 33.

When they were come to the place which is called Calvary, there they crucified him and the malefactors, one on the right hand and the other on the left.

And also verse 34, then said Jesus, Father forgive them for they know not what they do. Here we have the pivotal moment in the history of the world.

This is the reason that Jesus is born in the first place. It is the reason that he comes from heaven to this earth in order that he might be offered up as the perfect sacrifice, in order that he might die upon the cross.

Sometimes people perhaps question whether this sacrifice was absolutely necessary. Were things really so bad? Is mankind really so depraved that there's absolutely no other way?

[1 : 0 6] Well, let's look at what we see of mankind in this passage. We begin at verse 63 of the previous chapter where we read, The men that held Jesus mocked him and smote him.

Now these are probably soldiers of the temple guard, perhaps servants of the high priest that came as well. In other words, they were ill-treating him. They were beating him up. They mocked him, smote him.

In such a nice old-fashioned word, it suggests that they're giving a gentle shove. They would be well and truly beating him up. And when they had blindfolded him, they struck him on the face and asked him, Prophecy, who is it that smote thee?

We might have seen in recent years on the news issues of prisoner maltreatment, whether in Iraq or elsewhere. And what always sends a chill through my own spine is when you see prisoners hooded.

For some reason, that seems to make things worse when they're hooded and being perhaps ill-treated by their captors. Now, a prisoner who can see, who is alert and aware, that's one thing.

[2 : 1 2] But when he's hooded or blindfolded and then being beaten, this is what is being done to Jesus here. Now, these men, no doubt, perhaps they have nothing special personally against Jesus, but they would have known that he was something of a celebrity before.

He was powerful. He was politically untouchable. But now here they had him. They had him within their power. Why are they doing this? He's probably going to be crucified anyway.

Why are they beating him up? Why are they blindfolding him and knocking him down and mocking him, saying, look, who is it that hit you? No, name the person that hit you if you're so great, so powerful.

Why are they doing this? I would suggest to you that this kind of wanton cruelty is being done just because they can.

They are doing it simply because they can. They knew that Jesus had been somebody, a public figure. Now he was under their power.

[3 : 10] It wasn't for anything he had done to them. It wasn't for anything particularly personal. But now they can enjoy inflicted suffering on one who was helpless to oppose them, helpless to resist them.

It is said that after the Tsar of Russia had fallen from power and was under a house arrest in some country, country house with guards and everything, he was given a certain amount of freedom of the grounds.

A bicycle he was sort of going around the grounds in, and the guards used to amuse themselves by sticking the bayonets of their rifles into the spokes as he was going past.

So the bicycle would stop and the Tsar would go head over heels and land on the ground. They weren't killing him, but they were just mocking him. They were just exerting petty cruelties, enjoying the fact that this man who until recently had been the absolute ruler of all the Russians was now under their power.

A little bit of petty cruelty just because they can. And you'll notice that what it says here in verse 65 of chapter 22, many other things blasphemously stake the against him.

[4 : 26] This mocking against God the Son, it's not just one individual against another. In other words, God sees. God takes note. And he recognizes all that they are doing just because they can.

In Isaiah the prophet, we read in chapter 37, verse 23, Whom hast thou reproached and blasphemed? And against whom hast thou exalted thy voice and lifted up thine eyes and hide, even against the Holy One of Israel?

Lamentations, Jeremiah is inspired to write. O Lord, thou hast seen my wrong. Judge thou my cause. Thou hast seen all their vengeance and all their imaginations against me.

Thou hast heard their reproach, O Lord, and all their imaginations against me. The lips of those that rose up against me and their device against me all the day. Behold, they're sitting down and they're rising up.

I am their music. Their entertainment. They are doing this because they can. It's not the similar ways that sometimes some people delight in exerting cruelty against animals or against little children.

[5 : 43] The helpless, the weak. Because it gives them perhaps a sense of power. It gives them a sense of control. They enjoy inflicting pain and suffering just because they can.

And in doing so, they expect no comeback. The whole thing is, this person is helpless. Or this animal or this little child is helpless. It is bound and it is caged.

It cannot get back. It cannot do anything back to them. The classic stance of the bully is, they don't expect comeback. It's one reason why the bully is always a coward.

Because when he or she is confronted then by a power greater than themselves, you see them cower and squeal and terrified that something might be done back to them. This wasn't part of the deal.

They were meant to be able to get away with it. And they think, well, okay, fine. But you're laboring this point. I mean, what has this actually got to do with us? None of us knows just how much we are capable of if we actually think we would get away with that.

[6 : 48] I've mentioned in the past examples of how when some disaster or a flood or a natural disaster hits an area, what do you find people doing? Helping one another with compassion sometimes. But often what you'll find is looting.

Looting of shops. Looting of stores. Looting of other people's homes. Why? Because they know the police and the emergency services are stretched. They know that law and order is broken down. Now they can get away with it.

Now how these men are to Jesus is a reflection of how they, or we perhaps, are to one another.

That's nothing special to them about Jesus. Just another prisoner. They can have their fun with. They can do what they like with. How they would be with him is how they would be with somebody else. How we respond to Jesus is so often symptomatic of how we respond to each other.

It's not for nothing that Jesus says, you know, the first and greatest commandment is, Heal Israel, the Lord our God, who's one Lord. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy strength, with all thy mind.

[7 : 55] This is the first and the greatest commandment. And the second is like it. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Love God and love your neighbor. If you don't love the one, you won't love the other. If you're cruel in respect of the one, you'll be cruel in respect of the other.

There is this binding relationship between God and man, made in his image. How we are to the one is usually how we are to the other. And if you think about it, you'll see that that is so often the case.

People expect no comeback. But God sees and God knows. This reveals something of human nature.

It may not be our human nature, even if we had absolute opportunity. It might not be our world life, but there's plenty of it in human nature. It is there then.

It is there in subsequent centuries, down through the Middle Ages, at the modern times, the 20th century, communism, Nazism, human nature. If it is really unleashed, what is it like?

[8 : 57] This is a chapter about the darkness of human nature. This is one reason why Jesus had to come. That is one reason why he had to die. One reason why we needed forgiveness.

But moving on to the end of that, chapter 22, we also see here, we see the religious vested interest. As soon as it was day, the elders and the people, and the chief priests and scribes came together, led them into their council, saying, are you the Christ?

Tell us. He said, if I tell you, you won't believe me. If I ask you, you won't answer me or let me go. Hereafter shall the Son of Man sit in the right hand of the power of God. So are you the Son of God?

He said to them, you say that I am. He said, right, that's right. What do you need? We need any further witnesses. We ourselves have heard of his own mouth. Now we can put him to death. Religious vested interest is concerned with the maintenance and propagation of the institution.

Elsewhere in the gospel accounts, we are told how they are afraid that if Jesus upsets the apple cart, if he turns people actually to God, then the Romans might take away the chief priest's power, might take away the temple and the sacrifices and the money-spinning racket that they have there.

[10 : 09] They might lose everything. The institution, what will we do if the world doesn't like us anymore? And we've seen this in recent years, haven't we?

Christ must be sold out. His word must be let go just so we can stay sweet with the unbelieving worlds. Religious vested interest is seen by the appearance of Christ and by the witness of Christ and by the teaching of Christ to be itself simply an empty shell.

And you can't have that. You can't allow it to be seen as an empty shell. That's embarrassing. That makes people lose their faith in the institution, lose their faith in their religious leaders. The institution must continue.

It's Christ or it's us. Christ has to go. Jesus has to be put to death. The institution must survive. And like so many short-term fixes, whether political or religious or anything else, it seems that don't be tricked in the immediate problem.

But the long-term implications are vast. The religious institution there survived, what, another 30 years, another 40 years? And then the Romans came and destroyed everything.

[11 : 24] And Jerusalem has never been the same since. Jesus comes face to face with that which claims to serve his Father and exposes the emptiness of it.

It is something which we ourselves constantly must look at ourselves for. Are we serving Christ? Are we truly at his disposal? Or have we morphed into something that somehow stands alone without him?

If ever that day comes, then it is right that our institutions and our temples should be brought there. Because we serve Christ. And through him we serve our fellow men and women.

But if we reject the one, we will reject the other. And if we have not Christ as the very beating heart of all that we seek to do, we do not deserve to become the servants of the Lord.

Moving into chapter 23, we see another human response to Jesus. That which really doesn't want to get involved. Pilate just doesn't want to touch this one.

[12 : 30] He can sense this is toxic. There's only trouble here for him. Whatever he does, whichever side he chooses, he's going to be in trouble. He's going to have difficulties. Difficulties that are compounded by the fact that, as Matthew's account tells us, chapter 47, verse 19, when he was set down in the judgment seat, his wife sent up to him saying, Have thou nothing to do with that just man?

For I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him. Now what does she mean? She says don't have anything to do with it. It doesn't mean go and put him to death. She means get rid of him. Make him go away.

Just don't bring him near to us. There's only trouble where that man is. That man will be the undoing of you. And of us just don't have anything to do with him. Pilate wants rid of this problem.

And when people are faced with Christ, they just want rid of it. They just don't want it in their lives. It's going to be too much trouble. It's going to challenge the things that they are used to and comfortable with.

And they just don't want it. Thank you very much. Just make it go away. But you can't make it go away. And Pilate is forced into a corner.

[13 : 38] He is desiring to be indifferent. He is desiring neutrality. There's no neutrality with God at this. He knows that this is just trouble. And he wants to pass the buck.

And as soon as he hears, Oh, he's a Galilean. But Herod, give him to Herod. Maybe Herod will put him to death. Maybe Herod will chase him away. Maybe Herod will let him go. Maybe we can get rid of him somehow. Now, we should notice here that although there's all these different categories, there's the soldiers who beat up Jesus to begin with.

And then there's the chief priests and the scribes. And then there's Pilate. And then there's Herod. And yes, it says Herod and Pilate were made friends that day. Previously, they were at enmity. All these different groups do not love each other.

You know, we've just had a referendum in which we've got all these different political leaders sharing a platform, supporting the same thing. But they do not love each other. You know, they're not really on the same side except maybe a particular issue.

It is perfectly possible for people to be ranged together against something. But they don't actually love each other. Why do you see, for example, Herod here? When Herod is saying the chief priests and the scribes, they stood and they vehemently accused.

[14 : 46] If you don't say it, Herod says, right, is that so gentle? I'll have to listen to you guys because you're the chief priests. You're the leaders. And you know, I'm Herod. I'm an Israelite king. So I've got to do what you say. There's no word that he even cares about them.

Herod was a complete and total worldman. His court would have been a sink of pleasure-loving depravity. He has no interest in the chief priests.

He's not listening to them and what they say. All he wants, he wants to see some fireworks. He wants to see a trick. Come on, do a miracle, Jesus. He's been wanting to see Jesus for ages because he'd heard many things about him, for a sake, and he hoped to have seen some miracle done by him.

And some people will dabble in things that they think are to do with Christ because, say, they want to see signs or wonders. They want to see people fainting in the spirit. They want to see people talking with tongues or doing something exciting or having some kind of spiritual fireworks.

And that keeps them entertained. And this is what Herod wants to do. He wants to be entertained. He wants to see something special. And Jesus just doesn't answer them at work. And meantime, while he's trying to get something out of Jesus, there's the chief priests, haranguing him, and yakking away in the sight, accusing him of this, accusing him of that, and the next thing.

[15 : 57] Herod is not interested in them. He is not on their side. He does not love them. They are religious. They are devout. They are seeking to follow the written word of God.

As far as they understand it, he just loves the world and pleasure and the flesh and everything. He wants to be entertained. These guys are not on the same side. And he doesn't love Pilate especially. But now they are made friends because of their enmity with Jesus.

Herod and his men of war set him at naught, mocked him, arrayed him in a gorgeous robe, and sent him again to Pilate. Pilate, when he called together chief priests and the rulers of the people, said, You have brought this man to me as one that perverted the people.

Behold, I, having examined him before you, have found no fault in this man touching those things, will the accuser. Now, why is Pilate so keen to get rid of Jesus?

How is he so convinced after such a short conversation, you know, in verses 2 and 3 there, that Jesus is innocent? Well, I would suggest to you that Pilate is a hardened Roman governor.

[17 : 00] He has dealt with rebels and terrorists and murderers like Barabbas and other sedition for all his professional life. He has crucified hundreds of people.

He knows a criminal or a violent man or one who is seeking to set himself up as a rival leader. He knows one when he sees him. He can look into somebody's eye and say, Yeah, there's a killer.

There's rebellion. There's a thief. There's a man of fact. He knows himself. Well, if this really is the leader of some mega uprising like the chief priests are saying, he can look into the man's eyes and he can see there whether this is a political rebel, whether this is a killer, whether this is a leader of men.

And he looks at Jesus and he says, This is not one of them. He says, Are you the king of the Jews? He says, You say that I am. He says, Look, I can tell just by looking at this guy.

He is nothing compared to what you people say. I have examined him before you. I have found no fault in him. I want to let him go. The head of didn't find anything. I'll chastise him and I'll release him.

[18 : 04] He had to release somebody at the feast. They cried out all at once saying, Away with this man. Release to us Barabbas. Oh yeah, a real terrorist. A real murderer. Somebody they really wanted.

A pilot does not want to let go. He rather crucify that guy. No question. Pilate willing to release Jesus. Verse 20. Speak to them again. But they cried saying, Crucify him, crucify him.

Why? What evil have you done? I have found no cause of death in him. Now there's also a sense in which the hatred between Pilate and the Jews is playing out here. He doesn't want to give them what they want just because he doesn't want to give them what they want.

He hates them. They hate him. They need him just now in order to put Jesus to death. But they hate each other. And he just wants to play with them cat and mouse. He doesn't want to give them what they want.

He wants to do anything rather than what they want. And he doesn't want to put Jesus to death. He's a little bit afraid of putting Jesus to death. But they were instant with loud voices requiring that he might be crucified.

[19 : 04] And the voices of them and of the chief priests prevailed. In John's account of the gospel, we are told that they threatened him. If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend.

Whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar. In other words, we will report you. We will say that there was a political threat to the Roman Empire and you let it go. And anything that happens now will be on your head.

They cried out, away with them, away with them, crucifying. Pilate said to them, shall I crucify your king? The chief priests answered, we have no king but Caesar. You know, to get your head around this, you've got to try and imagine.

Think back if you can like the 1970s troubles in Ireland. Where you've got all the republican marches and flags and balaclava men with machine guns.

As though the chief of police and the riot police were there saying, Look, you know, I don't really want to kill this guy. You know, you're saying he's a leader of your republican movement or whatever.

[20 : 06] He's like a king. As if, oh, we've got nobody but God save the queen. You know, we are loyal subjects of her majesty. Aye, right. This is the Jews saying, well, we've got no king but Caesar.

That's the first time they would ever have said that. Oh, we're so loyal. We're such loyal Roman citizens. We just want this man to be to death. He set himself up as a rival claimant to Caesar's throne.

Pilate knew that wasn't true. But you see, the political lies they are telling. The darkness of it here. You've got the hatred between the Jews and Pilate. You've got the hatred of the men beating up Jesus.

You've got the empty hypocrisy of the religious leaders. There's just so much darkness in this chapter. You've got the pleasure-loving, fleshly indifference of Herod and his court.

All the world, all the flesh, all the devil, all the darkness is here in this chapter. And finally, he released unto them.

[21 : 04] And that for sedition and murder was cast into prison whom they desired. But he delivered Jesus to their will. And as they took him away, some people, yes, are mourning and lamenting over him.

He says, don't weep for me. Weep for yourselves. Things are going to get much worse. If they do these things in a green tree, what shall they do in the dry? When they were come to the place which is called Calvary, there they crucified him.

This is the only mention of the word Calvary in the entire Bible. It's only here that it occurs. This once, the other scripture account, the other gospel narratives use the term called Gotham, the Hebrew term.

Luke here is using the Latinized, means the same thing. They both mean a place of a skull. But here it is, Calvary. The only time it's mentioned in scripture. There they crucified him.

And the malefactors, one on the right, the other on the left. Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them, for they know not what will be here. And they parted his raiment and cast lots.

[22 : 10] And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them. They wiled him, saying, he saved others. Let him save himself, if he be the Christ, the chosen of God. Now, Mr. Matheson, and Ness has pointed out, and expounding this passage in the past, that the Greek word that we have translated as beholding, it's the same word as for spectating.

This isn't the sort of weeping crowd of women lamenting from a distance. This is just the crowd who've come to watch a public execution. They've come to see a spectacle. They are spectating.

They are just the crowd that the modern equipment would be passing a popcorn, and this is my very quote to me, just while they're watching. These men being crucified. This is the depths to which humanity descends.

Just entertainment, you know, beholding, spectating. Three men being crucified. Why wouldn't you pass the popcorn? And the rulers with them, that's not enough for them. They're not just spectating.

They are deriding him, saying, he saved others, let him save himself. Crucifixion isn't enough. The soldiers mocked him as well, coming to him and offering him vinegar, saying, if thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself.

[23 : 19] And there's the superscription. The sign over his pen, written in the language of international commerce, and of the Gentiles, the Greek. Written in the language of the imperial rulers, the Latin.

Written in the language of the local inhabitants, the Hebrew. Every single people group is united in the crucifixion of Jesus. All the mutual hatred, because while they're mocking him, the Roman soldiers are going to, look, this is the Jews.

This is their king. Look at them up there. Can't do a thing. Come on, save yourself if you can. They are mocking at the Jews, who are hating the Romans, and all of this is being absorbed and taken upon themselves by Jesus.

There's no wonder creation, and nature reflects this, with the darkness that falls upon the land from the sixth hour of midday until the ninth hour.

All the darkness, all the hatred, all the fury, and intensity of the world absorbed and poured into this one individual in the midst of it all.

[24 : 27] There they crucified him. And in the midst of it all, he still prays, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

This, my friends, is humanity's darkest hour. And I say that without fear of contradiction, because despite all the evil that has been perpetrated since then, despite all the genocides and all the gas chambers and all the evil that has been done, there were those who were opposing those things.

There were those who were fighting against it. There was conflict between those doing the oppressing and those rising up against them. There was always somebody to oppose the darkness, somebody to fight against it.

But here, they are all united against Christ himself. This is humanity's darkest hour in the history of the world.

Even nature itself chimes in with this. And there is darkness over all the land. Whilst Christ is in the process of dying, things had literally never been so black, never been so dark, the hatred never been so intense in all the world.

[25 : 47] The indifference of the wealthy rulers, the cruelty of the men of violence, the hypocrisy of the religious leaders, the callous spectating of the mob, it's all directed on Jesus.

And somewhere in these lines, if we're not rulers, maybe we're the less than sincere religious observers. Maybe we're just a crowd spectating.

Maybe, you know, we're indifferent. We don't hate them. We're not against them. We just don't want anything to do with it. Somewhere in the mirror. We find ourselves, and we recognize that it is for the likes of us that Jesus was crucified.

Not for the saints and the holy, for sinners, for those enveloped in the darkness, which nature itself reflects, as we read in verse 44 there.

All directed at Jesus. This is the earth's darkest hour. And then, then he died.

[26 : 50] And his pain ended. And the hatred and the darkness had been absorbed. And death itself is swallowed up. And what happens at the ninth hour?

You see, if we were to look ahead to verse 44, we mentioned, from the sixth hour midday, there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour, three o'clock in the afternoon. That's the time when Jesus died, the time of evening sacrifice.

And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, which we now know to be the words that he spoke in John's account of the gospel, it is finished. Then he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.

And having said this, he gave up the ghost. He has died. And what happens at the ninth hour? The skies begin to clear. The darkness begins to lighten.

The worst is over. The darkest hour has passed. And earth will never again be so concentrated in its hatred, in its inhumanity, in its darkness.

[27 : 58] Yes, there will be plenty of instances of it, but it will never again be so devotedly focused on one sight and one individual. It will never again be so intensely dark as it was at that hour.

Jesus dies. And the victory is won. And the skies literally begin to clear. It was finished. It is the Lord's death that clears the skies.

It is the Lord's death which absorbs the hatred. It is the Lord's death which pays the price of sin. Yes, for these brutal soldiers, blindfolding him, hooting him, mocking him, beating him up.

Yes, for Pilate, if only he would repent and believe. For Herod, if only he would repent and believe. For the chief priests. And the rulers of the synagogue said, yes, we know that some of them did repent and did believe.

Because we read in Acts chapter 6, a great company of the priests were a beach into the faith. Pharisees like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea and Saul of Tarsus later on became converted.

[29 : 07] People like James, the Lord's brother, who didn't believe in him at the time, became converted. This had an earthquake effect, not just literally, but spiritually, throughout Judaism.

And then out to the Gentiles, to the Greek commercial world, to Athens and Rome, until it outlasted even the grandeur of imperial Rome itself.

Rome became a Christian empire. And then, in fact, just like all other empires will fall, but Christ, and what he has done in you, is by this, that we do today, we show forth the Lord's death until he comes.

Because in this darkest hour of the world, all humanity is there. all the darkness, all the hatred, all the sin, people like you and me, oh, we're not perhaps as bad as that.

None of us knows what we'd be like if actually all the restraints are taken off, if actually we're put into an environment where we feel boxed into a corner, or we have to condemn somebody innocent, or else we ourselves will go down the tubes.

[30 : 20] If it's me or him, well, James, it can be him. None of us knows how we will respond, how we will stand up. But what Christ has now promised is that through his death and by his spirit that he sends, we will be given in that hour the strength that we need.

We will be given the grace to overcome. He himself is able to banish the darkness and to cause the skies to clear. By his death, all of this is absorbed into, as it were, one holy sacred vortex.

And the tornado of darkness and hatred finds its conclusion in him as he soaks it up and absorbs it and puts it to death in his own death.

At the moment of Christ's death, the triumph of darkness is over. By this, which we are soon to do, we show forth the Lord's death until he comes.

When he comes again, he comes not with darkness, he comes with the brightness of the clouds, he comes with the angels of glory, he comes with the heavenly trumpet, he comes with the hosts of the redeemed.

[31 : 36] There will never be so much light as it is when Christ comes again. For now, we have a mix of darkness and light, but what we don't have is the intensity of natural and spiritual and human darkness that there was in this chapter.

It is over. It is finished. It is finished because Christ has died and soaked it up. By this, we show forth the Lord's death. By this, we remember what he has done in this chapter.

If we are honest, somewhere we find ourselves, somewhere we see the reality of what we would be like, and somewhere we find the grace to give thanks and to receive the forgiveness that he offers.

But we know not what we do. Indeed, we know nothing until our eyes are opened by the grace of God and we see no man saying, Jesus only.

Let us pray.