

# Good Friday service

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[ 0 : 00 ] Turn me to Luke 23. Luke 23, verse 26 to 56. And these verses from Luke tell us the story from that first Good Friday.

! And to a large extent, I think that they are verses most of us are pretty familiar with.! And so I want to do something different this morning.

I want to retell the story using five different voices. That is, I want to look at this first Good Friday from five different perspectives.

And each time I want you to imagine a scene in which that character relays the events of the day to someone else. I'm going to speak in the third person, which might feel a little bit weird, to try and bring it to life, as it were.

I'll speak to you as if I was that character. And my hope is that these five different perspectives will help sharpen your focus on the events of that day.

[ 1 : 03 ] In a way that helps you to appreciate more and more of what Jesus did and why he did it. And so this Good Friday, I'm asking you to use your imagination, and I guess bear with me while I use mine.

But please keep your eyes on the Bible passage in Luke 23, and you'll see how the things that I'm recounting flow from there. And so to begin with, I want to speak from the perspective of the fellow traveler on the road with Jesus from Jerusalem.

I'm talking about Simon Cyrene. He's mentioned this in verse 26. And I want to ask you to imagine the scene a couple of days later when Simon of Cyrene finally gets home to Cyrene.

He walks through the front door of his house, and he starts talking to his wife. Hi, hon. I'm home. It's so good to be back. You wouldn't believe what the last few days have been like.

The things that happened in Jerusalem while I was there, it's amazing. I'd almost reached Jerusalem on Friday morning after the long walk in, and I noticed a crowd on the street coming out of the city head.

[ 2 : 13 ] When they got closer, I realized it was another of the crucifixion crew. They were on their way out to Skull Hill. Even the sound of that place is so eerie, isn't it?

Anyway, it looked as if there were three of them. I've no idea what they'd done, but anyway, they were being let out, and there was the usual group of tearful family members in tow.

There was a group of ghoulish onlookers who didn't want to miss it. Anyway, I stopped at the side of the street to let them pass and get a bit of a look myself. When all of a sudden, one of the soldiers grabbed me by the arm, I was shocked.

I was just minding my own business when suddenly the soldier was mishandling me. And he proceeded to tell me that one of the guys was too weak to carry his cross the rest of the way, and would I carry it for him?

In fact, I had to carry it for him. I protested, of course, but there wasn't much point. I didn't want to end up in hot water. So I handed my bag over to the soldier, and they rigged up the cross on my back.

[ 3 : 18 ] No wonder the guy was too tired to carry it. It weighed a ton. At least it wasn't too far to go. But, you know, it wasn't just physically draining.

I found it emotionally draining, too. I've only ever seen these crucifixion crews in passing. Now, never walked with one of them on their journey out of Skull Hill.

There were all these women there who must have been family or friends of the guy whose cross I was carrying, and they didn't stop crying the whole way. Actually, at one point, the guy stopped walking, looked at these women in the eyes, and said some pretty strange things.

I'm not really sure what he meant, but I remember what he said. He told them not to weep for him, but to weep for themselves. He said there was a time coming when they will wish that they'd never brought children into the world.

He said that if they thought what was happening on that Friday was bad, then they would find that things are infinitely worse in the future. It was kind of creepy. As if he was some kind of prophet.

[ 4 : 28 ] And what he said was scary. It made me feel worried for my own kids, Rufus and Alexander. There was something about the way that he spoke that sounded like he knew what he was talking about.

I can't explain why. Anyway, when we got to Skull Hill, I could finally get the cross off my back. I got my bag back from the soldier who'd carried it for me, and I hung around for a few minutes, and I watched what happened next.

But I didn't stay long. I couldn't bear to watch. Crucifixion really is such a cruel way to kill a man. That's scene one.

Secondly, I want to speak to you from the perspective of the Roman centurion. The soldiers, I don't know whether you picked it up, they are mentioned many times in the chapter. And the centurion is one of them.

In fact, he's a leader of them. And he comes into sharp focus at the end of the story. And so I want you to imagine the scene that he's sitting around in the barracks that night, talking to a soldier who wasn't there, but someone he trusts enough to be honest with.

[ 5 : 37 ] Well, I've got to tell you, mate, it was no ordinary day. I've done plenty of these over the years, but this one was different.

Normally, these don't get under my skin at all, but this guy, Jesus, was really unusual. Somehow, he just seemed really peaceful all the way through it. Normally, they're cursing and kicking and freaking out, but he didn't seem to be like that at all.

It started out normally enough. We took him to Pilate's quarters along the normal route. He'd already had it from the flogging and the beating, so we dragooned some other guy to carry the cross off the way.

Then we strung and nailed this Jesus up along with two other crooks. He was in the middle. And when we got there, instead of yelling stuff at us, he calmly said, Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing.

And he was clearly wrong about that, because we absolutely knew what we were doing. But I thought it was really weird of him to pray for our forgiveness, and calling God Father was very strange.

[ 6 : 51 ] I've never heard you do that before. Most of the people thought he was nuts. They were yelling out all the usual insulting stuff from the bottom of the hill, but there was something different about that.

Some people were calling out that he claimed to be the Messiah. They were saying things about him saving people, but not being able to save himself. I asked around about that because it was so odd.

Apparently, he'd been going around these last few years, and he attracted quite a following. And they reckon he'd been able to cure people from their disabilities and their sicknesses. They said he'd been casting evil spirits out of people.

And one person even claimed that he'd been able to raise someone from the dead, although I can't imagine that's true. You would have to be God to do that. And I can't imagine any God would let himself be crucified.

Anyway, the other guys in the Legion caught on to all this talk of Jesus saving people. They thought it was so great, they joined in too. If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself. Plenty of lines like that. And I was chuckling away as I listened.

[ 7 : 57 ] But the more I watched him, and the more I heard the things that he said, the less and less I felt like laughing. If I'm honest, I found him unnerving.

And one of the criminals wanted his help and talked about his kingdom. And Jesus told him he would see him in paradise later.

Which was really strange. And then it started to get dark. The sun stopped shining. I can't explain it. And by this point, everyone had stopped laughing at Jesus.

A lot of people left. Those of us who were still there were pretty quiet. I don't know what happened. But it was almost as if the universe was grieving this guy's death.

I heard later that during the darkness, the huge curtain that hanged in the temple, just ripped down the middle, exposing the holy place. Who knows what was going on there. And then just when everyone was really quiet, and you could barely see your hand in front of your face, he shouted.

[9:03] I jumped with fright. He called out of the darkness, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. I've got to be honest with you, at this point, I found it impossible to hang on to all my skepticism.

I'm still not really sure who he was. But I'm pretty sure he was no ordinary man. Maybe he was meant to be the Jews Messiah.

If he was, I don't know what they'll do now, since they've killed him. I really don't know what to think, but I could tell that he was a righteous man. So I stood there.

And I found myself praying a quiet prayer to God, thanking him for this man's life. People can say whatever they like about that Jesus, and everyone else has got their theories, but I know what I saw.

And no one has ever died like that before, not during all my time in the army. This man was different in every way. And I'm not even sure he should have been hanging on that cross in the first place.

[10:06] That was seen too. Thirdly, I want to speak from the perspective of the Jewish leader. And a Jewish leader, I'm speaking here about Joseph of Arimathea. Look at verse 50.

It tells us that he was a member of the Jewish elders' council. They decided to take Jesus to Pilate and seek the death penalty. And in verses 56, we hear what Joseph did after his death.

And so I want you to imagine a scene on the Sunday of that first Easter. Joseph is at home talking with his son about the night before and what he was doing.

Well, my boy, I was home late last night because I was taking care of something very important. I'm happy to tell you about it, but you have to promise not to mention it to your friends in school or any of your uncles.

If some of them knew what daddy did last night, they'd be very, very unhappy. So do you remember on Thursday night, I was out very late again because of a council meeting.

[11:10] It was a really long one. And the council meeting was about what to do with this man, Jesus. We've talked about him before. He was the one going about all over Judea, teaching about God, doing some pretty amazing things.

Most of the council members couldn't stand him, didn't like him. They think he's leading people astray. They actually think he's been blaspheming. Do you know what that word means? It means bringing shame to the name of God.

And they think he's blaspheming because people are saying he is the Messiah, he is God's promised king. And most of the elders on the council just don't believe that.

They think Jesus is a very bad influence on the people. They think he's turning people away from religion and the temple. It's a very serious charge. To be honest, I'm not really sure what I think.

The scriptures tell us that definitely one day the king will come, that one day the Messiah will appear. And maybe Jesus isn't the Messiah, but between me and you, I thought he could be.

[12:16] After all, he speaks unlike anyone I've ever heard before. He seems to have God's power with him. He's a kind man. He's full of compassion. But he's not afraid to say what he thinks.

I've heard him really stick it to some of the elders. I'm starting to think he could be the one. And that's why I was really disappointed by the decision of the council the other night.

I thought we should protect Jesus. I definitely didn't think he deserved to die. So when it came to the vote, I voted not to send Jesus to Pilate, but I was outvoted.

And suddenly, that's why I was so sad yesterday too. I really thought we were making a huge mistake, and now I'm just really confused. Because if he really was the Messiah, I would have expected him to use his power to kind of get out of the situation.

The mess he was in. To avoid it. But he didn't do that. And so now I have my doubts. But I tell you one thing. I'm sure that the council did the wrong thing.

[13:20] And one of the things, son, that you need to learn about life is that sometimes you've got to stand up when people do the wrong thing. Even if it's unpopular. It's called integrity.

And it's because I want to be a person of integrity that I did what I did yesterday. So I went and I asked Pilate, and I asked if I could take care of Jesus' body. He agreed, so with the help of a few

others, I took Jesus' body down from the cross, and I wrapped it carefully. I placed him in our new family tomb. And some of Jesus' friends, they're all women, they came and they are going to prepare some spices to treat his body too. We wanted to handle his body with respect.

I thought it was the least that I could do. That's where I was last night. I can promise you though, that though I was home late, I was resting before the Sabbath began.

Because keeping God's law is an important part of integrity. Scene 3. Fourthly, I want to speak to you from the perspective of the crucified criminal.

[ 14 : 31 ] And so here I'm talking about the one who respected Jesus rather than the one who mocked Jesus. And in particular, I want to reflect on verses 38 to 43. And it's on this one where I know I'm slightly skating on thin ice.

I want you to stretch your imagination just a little bit further and picture a scene at the door of heaven. Of paradise. Of the gates of heaven itself. Sometime late in the evening on that first Good Friday.

I want you to imagine a conversation between that criminal and let's say the angel that's on the door. Oh, hi.

I'm not really sure I'm in the right place. If you'd asked me a couple of days ago where I'd be, I definitely have not said here. This place looks amazing.

I feel incredible. I feel like I've been released from not just my suffering. That crucifixion was hideous. But from the world itself. All its trouble and all its confusion and its angst.

[ 15 : 38 ] And I actually feel like I've been released from myself, if I can put it like that. My problems. My worst instincts. My emotional scars that I've had over the years.

Even the blackness of my heart feels like it's gone. But at the same time, I feel like more like me than I've ever been before.

It's hard to explain. I can tell you one thing though. I know exactly how it happened. It's all got to do with meeting that guy on death row this morning.

I'd heard people talking about him. Rumors. That over the last couple of years, word gets around, doesn't it? So it was pretty cool to finally meet him. Though it could have been in better circumstances.

There we were, both of us strung up on a cross. On Skull Hill, next to each other. I got what was coming to me.

[ 16 : 38 ] But for the life of me, I couldn't work out what he was doing there. All the stuff that I'd heard about him suggested that he was a really good bloke. He was always helping people, restoring people.

I guess those really religious fellas didn't care for him. And the following that he's got. When they were hanging him, they stuck up a sign above his head which read, this is the king of the Jews. They were mocking him. It was meant as a joke, but it got me thinking. My parents and my grandparents always talked about the king that God would send. They called him the Messiah. The more religious ones said that things would be better when he came. They said that he would make everything right. When the Messiah came, God's kingdom would come. So I'm watching this bloke next to me with a sign above his head.

And as they lift him up, he says something about God forgiving people for what they're doing to him. It blew me away. Who says that?

[ 17 : 43 ] People are yelling abuse at him. And he doesn't say a word. If that was me, I'd be yelling back for sure. Just giving people a full piece of my mind. What's to lose at that point? But not this guy.

Not this Jesus. He's just taking it. And then the other guy who was on death row, who was crucified on the other side, he starts up as well.

And he starts shouting to Jesus how lame he is. How he's meant to be the saviour of the world. But he can do jack to save us. And I don't know what happened.

I kind of snapped inside. It sounded all wrong to me. And this guy, Jesus, seemed legitimate. And all of a sudden, I'm hanging there thinking, why couldn't he be the king?

Who says he's not the Messiah? Maybe he is. Maybe that's why he's so different to us. And so I start yelling at the guy on the other cross, telling him to shut his mouth.

[ 18 : 44 ] I reminded him, we were both hung there because we deserved it. But the guy in the middle, he didn't deserve it at all. And I told him he was a fool for speaking like that. I mean, if Jesus really did come from God, then it would be wise to pay him some respect, right?

But then I did something I could never imagine doing. I turned my head towards this Jesus, and I said, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

And then he turned his head a little towards me, and with some kind of strange love in his eyes, he looked at me and he says, today you will be with me in paradise.

I couldn't believe it. Part of me didn't believe it. It seemed too good to be true. I was just asking him one simple question, and here he was promising me everything.

All I said was, remember me, that was it. Who would have thought it would be enough? I'd always thought that you had to be religious to get to paradise. I always thought heaven was for people who went to the synagogue or gave money to the poor, or kept the eight commandments, or however many there are.

[ 20 : 01 ] I thought heaven was for those who did a baptism, or were from a really religious family, or listened really carefully in Saturday school. I thought it was for good people.

I didn't think it was for the kind of people who end up getting executed for the sort of things I've done. Maybe I was wrong. Is it possible? I'm here, aren't I?

I'm still not sure I'm in the right place, but here I am. Is Jesus here? Or is he still on his way? I'd like to find him and say thank you.

That was scene four. Scene five, I want to speak today from the perspective of the modern reader. I want you to think of a man that lives in West London.

He lives a long way from the events of this chapter, but he's got a lifelong interest in them. He's 45 years old, though he looks a lot younger.

[ 21 : 12 ] I want to finish with my own voice. My own perspective. Because I wonder where this morning you find yourself in these verses. I wonder where you find yourself in the events of Good Friday.

Do you find yourself in Simon of Cyrene's shoes, the fellow traveler, looking on these events with curiosity, but in a detached kind of way? Or do you find yourself in the centurion's shoes with his uncertainty and with his questions, with a nagging and irresistible sense that there is something to this guy, Jesus?

Something that you can't quite put your finger on. Or do you find yourself in Joseph, that Jewish leader's shoes, not entirely sure who Jesus is, but doing your best to live with integrity before God and hoping that'll be enough?

Or do you find yourself in the criminal? And his wide-eyed amazement and his simple trust. I don't know if this will surprise you, but I find myself mostly in the criminal.

I've been around churches my whole life. I know the story of the Bible very well. I've been getting to know Jesus for 45 years. And so in those ways, the criminal and myself are nothing alike.

[ 22 : 41 ] But if reading the Bible for decades has taught me anything, it's taught me this, that I need Jesus and his forgiveness as much as anybody.

And I'm like this criminal in my sin. I've murdered anyone. I haven't been to jail. But I've failed God time and again over my 45 years, in big ways and small ways.

I've failed to be the person I could be. I've failed to be the person that he made me. And I've failed to be the person that in my better moments I'd like to be.

I've learned that being baptized or giving to the pu'er or obeying the Ten Commandments or working for a church aren't going to cut it with him.

And they are not what will see me in heaven. The only thing that will is my openness to making the same request of Jesus that the criminal did.

[ 23 : 48 ] And to bank everything on that answer. Jesus, remember me. Remember me.

Those simple words. It's a straightforward request, isn't it? But it's a request that takes some divine requested humility to make. Because that criminal knew that day that he needed Jesus to be king. And his only hope was that Jesus was the one who could forgive his sins and grant him life with God forever. And that is my only hope too. And the story of that first Good Friday is a story that I cling to because it's a story that reassures me of Jesus' answer to that request.

A criminal asked Jesus to remember him. Jesus said, I will. And that was all he needed to know.

And this Easter, that is all I need to know too. That Jesus will remember me though I don't deserve it. That Jesus will speak to me and guarantee me a place in his kingdom.

[ 25 : 04 ] And that he will walk with me every day of my life until I get there. And this Easter, the story of Good Friday speaks to you and dares you to find the humility to bank everything on Jesus and to ask him to remember you.

And the story of Good Friday also assures you that if you do that he will remember you. The criminal said, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

And Jesus answered, truly, I tell you today you will be with me in paradise.

Let's pray.