

Witnesses of Jesus' death on the cross (Luke 23:44-56)

Today, we will study from the scene where Jesus breathed his last on the cross and his body was laid in a tomb. The title of the message is "Witnesses of Jesus' death on the cross".

1. Witnesses of Jesus' death on the cross

Let's first read through today's passage.

44-56

⁴⁴ It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, ⁴⁵ for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶ Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last. ⁴⁷ The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man." ⁴⁸ When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. ⁴⁹ But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things. ⁵⁰ Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, ⁵¹ who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea and he was waiting for the kingdom of God. ⁵² Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. ⁵³ Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid. ⁵⁴ It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin. ⁵⁵ The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. ⁵⁶ Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.

Here, there are seven groups of witnesses of Jesus' death on the cross. We will look at them one by one.

(1) The centurion

The centurion had been witnessing closely what had happened to Jesus, starting from when Jesus was crucified till he breathed his last. Actually, he may

have even seen how Jesus was judged in the trial with Pilate.

He had seen: that Jesus prayed for those who crucified him and those who jeered at him "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Two criminals were crucified with Jesus. One of them saw Jesus, something changed in his heart, and asked him, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

He saw how Jesus suffered on the cross, and how he breathed his last. He also saw the sun stopped shining. It was as if Heavenly Father was covering up his suffering because it was too painful to show his suffer. It was as if the heaven and earth, which were created to praise God's glory, couldn't shine any longer without Jesus.

Jesus breathed his last, saying "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

The centurion must have seen many of criminals died on the cross before. Now he saw Jesus' death on the cross. And he became certain, "Surely this was a righteous man."

(2) The crowd

After judged in trial with Pilate, Jesus was handed over to people who demanded his crucifixion. And he was led away to the hill of Calvary. A large number of people followed him.

They were watching when Jesus was handed over and as he was walking to the place of crucifixion, as he was crucified, what he was like on the cross, and when he breathed his last.

As Jesus was going to the place of crucifixion, there was one incident. People seized Simon from Cyrene and put the cross on him and made him carry it in Jesus' place. When they arrived at the place of crucifixion, who was carrying the cross? It was Simon, not Jesus. If he is not careful, Simon might even be crucified in Jesus' place.

If the soldiers crucified Simon from Cyrene instead of Jesus by mistake, the people would know it. They wouldn't leave it as it is. Surely they would make a noise, "It's not him, but him!" But they watched. That was because it was Jesus.

Then, is there a possibility that after Jesus was handed over and before he was crucified, somebody replaced him and acted as a substitute for him? Or

after Simon started carrying the cross, in the midst of a lot of hustle and bustle, was it possible for one of Jesus' disciples to have replaced him? Both possibilities are denied by the fact that the crowd witnessed Jesus' death.

The crowd played a big role as the witnesses of Jesus' death.

(3) Those who knew Jesus, including the women who had followed him from Galilee

Let's look at a bit further ahead. After Jesus' resurrection, and then the day of Pentecost, the church came into being. And more and more people were added to the Lord's disciples, and even after the believers were scattered, His church had spread to various places. The center of their message was "Jesus' cross and his resurrection." (Acts 2:32, 3:15, 4:2, 4:10, 4:20, 4:33, 5:30, 13:29-30, 17:3) Wherever they went, no matter how many times they were told not to, they continued to speak about Jesus' cross and resurrection.

In those days, the New Testament was not written yet. None of the four gospels were written yet. Jesus' cross spoken in early churches agree with the facts. The description of his cross in the gospels show the facts. How can we know that? There were the witnesses. Those who knew Jesus witnessed Jesus' death.

(4) Soldiers

John 19:31-34

³¹ Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. ³² The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. ³³ But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. ³⁴ Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.

When they crucify someone, they will nail the person's hands and feet. But he will not die immediately. When he is about to faint, he will recover consciousness because of the pain. It is said the person will keep suffering for two or three days. So crucifixion is a cruel punishment.

The following day was the Sabbath, Jews didn't want the bodies left on the crosses, they asked Pilate to quicken their death. So the soldiers broke the legs of the two criminals. I've read in somewhere that when the legs are broken, the whole weight will be on the both hands, and then he will have difficulty in breathing. Don't try, it's dangerous.

The soldiers broke the legs of the two criminals. And when they came to Jesus, he was already dead. One of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, to make sure he was really dead. They reported this to the centurion. Or the centurion himself may have witnessed it right there. The soldiers checked Jesus death, and they declared Jesus' death to be true.

(5) Pilate

Mark 15:44-45

⁴⁴ Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. ⁴⁵ When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph.

Pilate was surprised to hear that Jesus, who was just crucified that morning, was already dead. "That cannot be true. Isn't it some kind of mistake?" So he summoned the centurion who was in charge of the execution, and asked, "Are you sure? Have you checked if he is really dead?" Pilate got the confirmation from the centurion, and he was convinced about Jesus' death.

The fact that he gave Jesus' body to Joseph shows that Jesus' death was legally confirmed.

(6) Joseph of Arimathea

Joseph of Arimathea was a prominent member of the Council. He didn't make it official that he was a disciple of Jesus because he feared the Jews, but he didn't agree with the other Council members' decision and action regarding Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. (Mark 15:43, John 19:38, Luke 23:51)

He was one of those who were waiting for the kingdom of God. Jesus' disciples were hoping that he was the one who was going to restore the kingdom to Israel. (Lk 24:19-21, Acts 1:6) But, this Jesus was arrested, crucified and died. He received his body. And he wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in a rock.

When he received Jesus, if he still had hope to bring him back to life, he

wouldn't have buried him. Avoiding the crowd and the soldiers, he would have brought Jesus to somewhere and would have given him treatment so that he would recover. But, with another man, he wrapped Jesus' body, with the spices, in strips of linen, in accordance with Jewish burial customs. (John 19:40) It was clear even to those around him that he was treating Jesus as a dead man. He checked Jesus' death with his hand.

(7) Women who had followed Jesus from Galilee

The women who had followed him from Galilee had been watching, how Jesus was being crucified. And they were also watching Joseph of Arimathea receiving the body of Jesus and laying it in the tomb.

And they rested on the Sabbath. They didn't do anything on that day. Let's look at this closely.

Jesus was crucified on the day before the Sabbath day. That was Friday. He breathed his last on Friday around 3 o'clock in the afternoon. The Sabbath rest starts from Friday evening to the following day. Saturday morning is still the Sabbath. So they didn't do anything during that day. The Sabbath ends on Saturday evening and the following day starts. That day was the third day, counting from the day Jesus was crucified. The women still didn't start their action on Saturday evening. Perhaps they couldn't do anything because it was totally dark. The Saturday night has passed and Sunday morning came. And they went to the tomb. (Lk 24:1)

What does this mean? They clearly knew that Jesus had died. If they thought Jesus was still alive, they would have tried to save him as soon as possible. The longer they leave him, the less likely he would be saved.

If one of their sheep falls into a pit, they will not leave it even if it is on the Sabbath. They will take hold of it and lift it out. (Matt 12:11) If they do it even for a sheep, of course they will try to save a person.

But they left Jesus to be laid in the tomb, and about 38 hours later, they visited the tomb. Why? They saw Jesus' dead body closely. And they had no doubt that Jesus was dead.

We have been looking at seven groups of witnesses for Jesus' death on the cross. We can summarize it like this; Luke, a medical Dr. carefully investigated people in different standpoints, and he says "Jesus died on the cross. There is no room for doubt about it."

Why is Jesus' death on the cross so important? It is because if there is no death, then there is no resurrection. Because we are sure of Jesus' death, we can be also certain of his resurrection.

Another thing is the meaning of Jesus' cross; what is accomplished by His death on the cross. If his death on the cross is not true, all God's promises given through Jesus' cross, in the Bible, will be just empty words, with no power.

Seven groups of witnesses in different standpoints, all are testifying that Jesus died on the cross. What was done by Jesus' death on the cross?

2. The curtain was torn

When Jesus died on the cross, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. (Luke 23:45, Matt 27:51, Mark 15:38) This incident teaches us the meaning of Jesus death on the cross.

Heb 9:2-7

² A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand, the table and the consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. ³ Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, ⁴ which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. ⁵ Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now. ⁶ When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. ⁷ But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance.

The tabernacle is divided into two sections¹; front section and back section by the curtain. (Ex 26:33) When they go in from the entrance, they will enter the front section, the Holy Place. According to various regulations they offered sacrifices there, and the priests regularly entered there and carried on their ministry, worshipped the Lord.

¹ an illustration of the tabernacle, <http://vananne.com/serpentdove/Curtain.htm>,
<http://www.jesuswalk.com/moses/images/tabernacle-complex-diagram-1800x1166x300.jpg>

However, behind the curtain, into the Most Holy Place, only the high priest could enter, and he could only enter once a year. At the Most Holy Place, the Ark of the Covenant was placed. And on top of it there was the atonement cover. And, two cherubim were above the atonement cover to overshadow it. Inside the Ark, there were the stone tablets of the covenant, where Ten Commandments were inscribed. Those items express God's presence, glory and holiness. (Ex 25:10-22)

When the high priest entered the Most Holy Place, he had to offer the sacrifice, according to the special regulation. If there is even one error, he would die. Of course, people other than the high priest were not allowed to enter. If they enter, they would die immediately. (cf. Ex 28:43)

(1) By the blood of Jesus

Heb 10:19-20

¹⁹ ...we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place *by the blood of Jesus*,²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body

By Jesus' death on the cross, the curtain which separated God and man was removed. The way to come before God was opened.

The first covenant was like this; Only once a year, on a specific day, only the high priest alone could enter the Most Holy Place. And for this, every year, the sacrifice must be carefully offered according to many regulations. If there is any error, even just one, he would die.

On the other hand, by Jesus death on the cross, the new covenant, better hope, the better covenant was given. (Heb 7:19, 8:6) We can boldly enter the true Most Holy Place, through Jesus.

In the first covenant, not all the people, but only one chosen high priest could enter the Most Holy Place, and come before the presence of God. And also he had to do it very carefully, on the specific time, according to the strict regulations. He was not allowed to come before the presence of God whenever he wished.

But, by the cross of Christ, the curtain that separated us from God was torn. The way was opened for us to come close to the holy presence of God.

We can now enter the Most Holy Place, and directly have fellowship with God whenever we wish, while we are on this earth, in this body. We can come

before God boldly, without fear. That is what was accomplished by the cross of Jesus. By the cross of Jesus, the curtain that separated us from God was torn. We now have no regulations regarding who can come before the presence of God, how and when. Now it's for everybody, anytime, through Jesus.

(2) Confident to enter

Heb 10:19-20

¹⁹ ...we have *confidence to enter* the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body

In the first covenant, the curtain separated God and Man. In the new covenant, the curtain is the way. That is the way for us to come back to God, to enter into His presence, and to have fellowship with Him.

The Bible is saying, the way was given for us to enter into the presence of Holy God. That is Jesus. That is the promise of God, God's new covenant. We understand it and know that Jesus died on the cross, so we can be confident that God's new covenant has been accomplished. A person who has confidence in this, will boldly enter into God's presence. People who boldly enter into God's presence are the witnesses for Jesus' death on the cross in their times. We've understood that we can boldly enter into God's presence through Jesus. If we not only understand it, but practice it, we are the witnesses of Jesus' death on the cross in our times, today.

(3) New and Living way

Heb 10:19-20

¹⁹ ...we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a *new and living way* opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body

Jesus surely died on the cross. At the cross of Jesus, the curtain separated us from God was torn. The way was opened for all people to enter into the presence of Holy God. Through faith in Jesus, we can have fellowship with God whenever we wish. And it is not that we see God who is far away, but we can have close fellowship with Him as if a small child was talking to his father

sitting on his lap. That's the new life for people who believe in Jesus.

My beloved friends, how do we spend time with God daily? How much are we looking forward to and treasure the time when we listen to His voice? How much are we aware that God is with us while we are so busy with work outside or work at home? Are we welcoming Him to be with us whatever we do, wherever we go, whoever we are with?

“Where are you?” Glorious, holy God left that glory by Himself and came to this sinful broken world to search for us. “Where are you? Why do you keep away from me?” It was not to scold us, abuse us nor punish us, but to have fellowship with us again. He is calling to us, “Come back to me.” “Remain in my love.”

Because of our sin, our fellowship with God was broken. God took the initiative to restore it. That is grace for us, a free gift. It didn't cost us anything. But it does cost God extravagant sacrifice. That is the cross of Jesus. The life of Jesus was offered for the reconciliation. For God, the fellowship with us is such an important, precious thing.

How much do we value the fellowship with God? How much do we value the joy of being in the presence of God? Where is Jesus in our Sunday services? Are we not making Jesus feel lonely from Monday to Saturday? Are we witnesses of His death?