

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF LUKE – PART TWENTY-FOUR

The religious leaders had captured their prisoner with help from one of His 'friends'. His willing acknowledgement that He was the Christ, the Son of God, gave them the justification they sought for condemning Him to death for blasphemy. Under Roman rule they had no power to carry this sentence out so they needed a charge which would stick with the Roman governor. Before Pontius Pilate they accused Him, not of being the Son of God in which Pilate would have no interest, but of being a rebel against the Emperor. He had accepted the title of King of the Jews, (19:38-40) but had never urged rejection of Caesar's rule. On the contrary He had instructed the Jews to pay taxes to Caesar while keeping their lives under God's authority. (20:25) When Pilate asked about Him being King of the Jews, Jesus agreed and Pilate acquitted Him. Having the title was no crime because there were other kings in the empire like Herod who were not rebels. Jesus' accusers would not give up so Pilate looked for a way out. If Jesus was from Galilee he could pass responsibility to Herod whose jurisdiction it was. (23:1-7)

Herod had been wanting this opportunity for a long time, (9:9) not to hear Jesus' teaching but to check the rumour that He was John the Baptist resurrected, and then to see Him do some miraculous tricks. Despite a torrent of abuse and accusation from the chief priests, Jesus remained silent even when cross examined by Herod. The Lord never responded to personal abuse but on the other hand He did not hesitate to acknowledge His ministry. He in us would do the same today. Herod was frustrated and resorted to ridicule by dressing Jesus as a king and so inadvertently confirming His claim to be the King of the Jews. He passed the problem back to Pilate whose friend he now became. They were united in their failure to discharge their responsibility to be fair judges. (23:8-12)

Pilate tried now to announce his 'not guilty' verdict supposing the combined authority of him and Herod would be accepted. There was a long established custom of an amnesty for one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Pilate planned to by-pass the chief priests, expecting that the crowd, given an opportunity, would choose their King. Some in the crowd may have supported this proposal to free Jesus but they were soon drowned out by the enemies of the Lord shouting the name of Barabbas, a failed rebel and murderer, as the one to be released, and for Jesus to be crucified. Like many other politicians before and since, Pilate listened to the loudest voice of public opinion, above his own conscience, and agreed to crucifixion. (23:13-25)

Somewhere in the watching crowd as Jesus began carrying His cross to Calvary was a visitor from North Africa. Simon of Cyrene was also known as Niger, which means black. (Acts 13:1) Like many another dark-skinned man since he was picked out by the soldiers for the hard manual task of carrying the heavy wooden cross. The experience changed his life. He carried the cross for Jesus and then watched as Jesus carried sin for him. He would later become a respected Bible teacher in Antioch. Bad moments can become the life-changing means of God's blessing. (23:26)

The account continues describing not the physical agony of crucifixion, terrible though it must have been, but the impact of events on those who watched and then Jesus' response to them. Firstly there was the great crowd of sympathizers whose support had somehow been shouted down by those who sought His death. The Lord recognized their grief but warned them that far worse was to come for them and their descendants as Christians were persecuted in the coming years. Next there were two criminals crucified beside Jesus in fulfillment of Isa. 53:12. Symbolising the rest of humanity, one blamed Him and demanded miraculous intervention to free them from the cross while the other acknowledged how he deserved his punishment and asked only to be included in Jesus' plan for His followers. Jesus promised that they would be together

in Paradise that very day, beautifully demonstrating that salvation is only by faith and through grace. In the few short hours of his new Christian life on earth there would be no opportunity to demonstrate the good works many would think necessary to qualify him for a chance of Paradise. At the same time Jesus prayed for forgiveness for those who hammered in the nails as well as those who organized and ordered it. That prayer would almost immediately be answered for one man at least who saw the innocence of Jesus and the hand of God at work.(v.47) Other soldiers unwittingly fulfilled yet another scripture,(Ps.22:18) as they gambled for His clothes, His only earthly possessions. They too were offered forgiveness.(23:27-43)

While the Son of God spent His last hours caring for those around Him, the Father in heaven, was demonstrating His power over the physical world. For three hours from midday there was total darkness, again as promised repeatedly in the Old Testament.(Isa.13:10; Ezek.32:7,8; Joel 2:10) The great curtain which separated the Holy of Holies where only the high priest could go from the Holy Place where the remaining priests were allowed,(Exod.26:31-33) was ripped from top to bottom. The way into fellowship with God for every believer had finally been opened. Jesus, knowing His work was complete, willingly surrendered His life into the hands of His Father with the words of yet another Psalm,(Ps.31:5) which expresses trust in God when all seems hopeless. The centurion who deserved to stand trial for torturing his prisoner rejoiced. Jesus followers and friends looked on, numb with grief.(23:44-49)

Support came from another unexpected quarter. Joseph of Arimathea, a dissenting voice in the Jewish Council, now declared himself a believer who knew the Old Testament had pointed to Jesus by going to Pilate to ask for the body and providing his own future tomb for a burial place. The women watched and went away to prepare for the funeral. Everyone rested and sorrowed until Sunday morning. Was that the sad end of a remarkable story?(23:50-56)

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What did it take to convince the women who came early in the morning to the tomb that Jesus had risen from the dead? Why had they not expected His resurrection? How did the angels persuade them? Why did the apostles not believe the women when they heard the news? What did it take to convince Peter? How does that help us to understand the difficulty others have today believing in the resurrection?(24:1-12)
2. Why did the two disciples on the road not recognize Jesus when they met Him? What did they tell Him about Himself? Why did they not expect the resurrection? How had they received the news of the resurrection from the women? How did Jesus go about revealing Himself to them? What did He do first? How does His answer help us to understand the Old Testament? How finally did He reveal Himself? What did they realise looking back which can also be our experience? How did they immediately respond once they recognized Him?(24:13-35)
3. How again did Jesus convince the remaining apostles that He was risen? How does that help us today?(24:36-43)
4. How did He once more build on their recognition of Him? How does the Bible still make sense on the same basis? What final instruction did He give them? Why were they to stay in the city for the moment? What is the secret of doing His work effectively? How on this occasion did He say goodbye? Was this the Ascension? What was the effect on His friends of being finally convinced of the resurrection?(24:44-53)