

Sonoraville Baptist Church
Sunday, April 17, 2011 – 11:00 AM
Rev. Steve Skates, Pastor

The Road to the Cross – Luke 23:26-31

Introduction: Today we come to the third message in our Journey to Calvary series as we're looking at the roads Jesus traveled on His way to the cross. We first saw Jesus on the road to Jerusalem; that place He was determined to go fulfill God's plan in spite of inconveniences, opposition, misunderstandings and stumbling blocks. Last Sunday we traveled the road to Gethsemane where we got an idea of the enormous price Jesus paid to purchase forgiveness for us.

This morning we're going to fast forward from the Garden where Jesus was arrested, to the Via Dolorosa – the way of suffering. We're going to see what happened on the Road to the Cross where Jesus would be crucified.

The story of Jesus' crucifixion has been preached for over two centuries. We've all probably heard it over and over as it has been taught in Sunday School classes, discussed in small group meetings, seen in movies, and preached from pulpits. Yet every time we hear it, the story of the cross never ceases to amaze. In fact, almost every time I hear it, I find something new or something I'd never seen before that recreates the wonder of it all. Perhaps you will do the same today, as I share with you a couple of things we can learn from Jesus' journey down the road to the Cross. First, I want you to see that it was:

1. A Road of Opportunity (26)

Open your Bible to Luke 23:26. As you're turning, let me set the stage for you. It's about 9 am on Friday. Jesus allowed Himself to be arrested late Thursday night. All night long Jesus was shuffled back and forth from court to court where each time, He was mocked, slapped around, punched, stripped and flogged. During the night and wee hours of the morning, Jesus stood trial before the High Priest, was interrogated by Pilate and was questioned by Herod. He was tired, His body was bruised, bleeding and swollen and He was left in a very weakened condition from the loss of blood and sleep as He was being lead out of the city on the Road to Calvary.

Luke 23:26 (NIV): *“As they led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus.”*

Now let me explain what was happening. Under Roman authority, it was customary for soldiers to force a convicted criminal to carry their own cross as they made their way to the crucifixion site. In this case it was not a criminal, but the sinless Jesus who had been sentenced to be crucified. However after all that He'd been through He had little strength left to carry a 200 lb. cross. So understandably, an exhausted Jesus was probably moving too slow to suit the soldiers, so they grabbed, an innocent bystander named Simon, and forced him to carry the cross.

Now, don't think that Simon gladly took on this task. This is not an act of compassion on Simon's part. In fact, he was probably repulsed by the idea, but he was even more afraid for his own life. After all, these Roman soldiers had developed quite a reputation for their impulsive cruelty. So he submits, and he picks up Jesus' cross and carries it for Him. That is the story that we all probably know. But as Paul Harvey used to say, Here's the rest of the story.

The place where Simon was from was Cyrene, which was a Greek settlement located on the Northern coast of Africa in what is modern-day Libya. Simon had probably come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover because Mark's gospel tells us that he was *“passing by on his way in from the country.”* (**Mark 15:21 NIV**).

Mark also tells us that Simon was *“the father of Alexander and Rufus.”* This is significant because Alexander and Rufus were two fellow Christians who were known by Mark and other believers at the time he wrote his gospel. Because Mark probably wrote from Rome, Alexander and Rufus may have been active in the church there. Also, this Rufus, may have been the man Paul greeted in **Romans 16:13 (NIV):** *“Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too.”* If this is so then Paul would have been referring to Simon's wife.

The point is that when Simon was forced to carry the cross, it could have very well been the very act that led to Simon's faith in Christ. What began as a forced and resented act, became an opportunity for salvation, not only for Simon, but for his entire family as well.

Isn't that just like Christ? How often does He turn something bad into something good? I tell you, it's more often than we think.

I think about the 400 Christians from the town of Meulaboh, Indonesia who were not allowed to celebrate Christmas in the town by the Muslims. So instead of protesting and demanding their rights, they went outside the town to a high hill to celebrate. And that is where they found safety when the tsunami of 2006 hit, killing 80% of the townspeople, but they survived.

I think of Dave Roeber, who in 1969 was serving in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam when an enemy bullet hit the phosphorous grenade he was holding and the explosion blew off part of his head and the right side of his body.

As he was picked up by the rescue and recovery team, he was left for dead, but he somehow let the medics know he was alive.

He then underwent dozens of agonizingly painful surgeries and many difficult skin grafts leaving him mostly scarred and disfigured. But when His wife finally got to see him, she kissed him and told him, "*Honey, I love you. I'll always love you. And I want you to know that whatever it takes, whatever the odds, we can make it together.*"

Today, Dave Roeber travels around the country telling folks, "*I am twice the person I was before I went to Vietnam. For one thing, God has used my suffering to help me feel other people's pain and to have an incredible burden to reach people for Him. The Lord has let me have a worldwide, positive effect on people's lives because of what I went through. I wouldn't trade anything I've gone through for the benefits my trials have had in my life, on my family's life and on countless teenagers and adults I've had the opportunity to influence over the years.*"

Simon probably felt the same way as he turned that resented act of cruelty, into an opportunity to find faith in a risen Savior.

Next, we see something else on the road to the Cross. We see:

2. A Road of Compassion (27-31)

Luke 23:27-31 (NIV) 27. A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. 28. Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. 29. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!'" 30. Then " 'they will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!" ' 31. For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

Here we are in the midst of a horrible drama moving along a street leading out of Jerusalem, and suddenly you have Jesus stopping and talking to some of the mourning and wailing women, and talking about barren women, people crying out for the mountains to fall on them and something about a green and dry tree. What is going on here? I mean, if you're like me, I'm scratching my head and saying to myself "*I don't get it.*"

Well, hopefully we'll all "*get it*" here in just a minute. You see, I believe this reveals something wonderful about the compassion of Jesus. So let's see what He's talking about.

If you know anything about Jewish history and customs, you will know that the Jews have always considered the birth of a child as a blessed event. Even when living as slaves in Egypt, the birth of a child was a joyous occasion. It was perceived as evidence that God was blessing them. But being barren was viewed as a curse, a harsh judgment of God for some sin.

But here, we have Jesus talking about the opposite. He's saying the time will come when barren women will be blessed. What's he talking about? He's referring to a time in the not too distant future, when the Jewish nation would be undergoing some terrible judgment and times. These times would be so awful; Jews will say that the woman who is barren is better off than the woman who had kids. Jesus said He saw such a time coming when Jews would rather the mountains fall on them than face the alternative. Most Bible commentators say that Jesus was referring to the destruction of Jerusalem which happened in AD 70, some 35 years after Jesus was crucified. In that day, the Romans came down so hard upon the Jews, that literally thousands upon thousands of

Jews were killed; many by crucifixion. This destruction and slaughter was so bad, that one ancient historian claimed that before it was over there wasn't any wood left to be found in the city with which the Romans could make any more crosses.

So do you see what's going on here? Jesus, after all of the abuse He's already endured, is traveling the way of suffering on His way to the place He'll be crucified, and along the way, He hears the mournful cries of women, and His heart is heavy. But it's not heavy because of what is about to happen to Him. Jesus' heart is heavy because of what He knows will be happening soon in Jerusalem. As Jesus made His way on the road to the cross, His heart was filled with compassion for others. And it would stay that way in His final hours as He would ask God to forgive the people crucifying Him because, "*they don't know what they're doing...*" (**Luke 23:34 NIV**). That's compassion!

We also see it as Jesus instructed John to take care of His mother. What compassion! And we also see Jesus compassion in the way He forgave one of the thieves that was being crucified with Him telling him, "*today you'll be with me in paradise.*" (**43**). No wonder we sing that old song that says, "*Amazing pity, grace unknown, and love beyond degree.*"

Conclusion: As Jesus made His way down the Via Dolorosa that Friday morning, He was paving the way of opportunity for people like Simon and his family to be saved. He's still making that way available today, for today is the day of salvation. Today is the day of opportunity for you to put your faith and trust in, not a dead martyr, but a risen Savior.

And also, as Jesus made His way down the road to the Cross, His heart was filled with compassion for people and their lost condition. He's still concerned about people's condition today. He's concerned about your past, your present, and your future. He's looking out for you because He cares.

Today, would you reach out to Jesus as His arms of compassion reach out to you? He can save and He can heal today if you'll only take Him at His word.

As we stand and as we sing, will you respond to the call of Christ on the road to the Cross?