



Luke 23:32-43
Fact or Fiction
“Helpless Jesus”

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So, last week’s sermon needs a little bit of a follow-up, and I want to start with that. Last week I talked briefly about the two Simons who were disciples of Jesus. In writing the sermon, I didn’t completely trust my memory on which was Simon the Zealot and which was the Simon who became known as Peter. So, I did just a quick bit of research where both Simons were discussed, and went with what I read there. After a few of you reached out to me on Monday about this, I again looked at what I’d read I realize that I completely mis-read it.

So, last week was not a good week for me in regards to reading comprehension, apparently. I confessed in the sermon about my failure in reading directions (or reading the calendar) for signing up JD for swim lessons...and it turns out that in the same sermon I mis-read about the two Simons in my sermon prep. And, I’m really sorry about that. I didn’t mean to confuse anyone about which Simon becomes known as Peter, and which is Simon the Zealot. I will also say, I am grateful for the gracious way each person who asked about it approached me. They’d say something like, “What you said is different than what I understood...so I’m curious where you got that?” Really, it was very gracious. Any of you would have been completely justified in coming to me and saying, “Pastor Brian, you’re an idiot.” 😊 Instead, you helped me maintain my dignity. So, thank you.

The irony, of course, is that the series we’re in is all about getting the facts about Jesus right in our heads...and I doubted what was in my head about the two Simons, then mixed up the facts as I mis-read. Regardless, the point of last week’s sermon is all still valid. Also, neither of the Simons is our Lord and Savior. Jesus is. Making a mistake about a Simon is fine; making a mistake about Jesus as Lord and Savior is not. And so today we’re continuing in this quest of fact-checking what’s in our heads about Jesus with what we read about him in the Gospels.

And when you get down to the last hours of Jesus’ life as we’re looking at today, a person could draw the conclusion that Jesus was fairly helpless.

Given all that he did to help others that the biographies of Jesus tell us about (the blind seeing, deaf hearing, lame walking, infirmed made well, the hungry fed, etc.) it is stunning to some people – including people in Jesus’ day – that he seems unable to help himself in his own time of need. And so, some people have this perception of Jesus that he actually is helpless. Let’s read **Luke 23:32-43**. This is God’s word to you and me this morning...we’ll read it all at once today.

Three separate times in these verses, Jesus is verbally mocked by the people around him (maybe one is not intended as a mocking). There’s a fourth with the sign put over his head. But let’s focus on the three verbal ones. Each time, the mocking centers on this phrase, “save yourself.” Obviously, news of Jesus and what he had done for people had spread far and wide. Jesus had a reputation that went before him. Titles such as Messiah, Savior, King. But also, his reputation was that he “saved,” or “rescued,” people.

The Greek word used each time is “sozo.” Literally, it means, “to rescue, save, make well/heal.” So, the challenge before him now from these people, as we read in the passage, is to do what he did for others, for himself: to save himself from this deadly situation.

There are three broad groups of people who do this. First, there’s the rulers in verse 35. Who they are exactly isn’t defined. We don’t know for sure if they’re Roman government officials, Jewish rulers, or someone else. The word for “rulers” here is used throughout the gospels to talk about government rulers as well as religious rulers, and there’s not enough context here to say one way or the other for sure.

Then we see that the Roman soldiers also pick on him as “king of the Jews.” Lastly, there are the criminals. While one of them has respect for Jesus and recognizes that Jesus really doesn’t belong in this place between the two of them, the other one is more mocking, especially given that he deserves the punishment he’s getting.

So, there are people from three distinctly different arenas of life: “rulers;” working class soldiers; and criminals. **Jesus’ response to them, however, is *not to help himself*.** Really, it’s a temptation to do so. Jesus knew he would go through this trial. He talked about it with his disciples, he prayed about it just shortly before in the garden of Gethsemane. He is not surprised by this. And now he’s facing pressure not just to heal or save other people, but himself.

This passage reminds me of when Jesus was in the desert for forty days and was tempted by Satan to use his power, to use his connection to God the father, for his own benefit. It’s very similar here: It’s a temptation to save himself from death on the cross. It’s a temptation to sin to come down off the cross because it's not the will of the Father that he should come down off of the cross. Jesus Christ is perfectly obedient to his Heavenly Father in everything that he does. His Father sees the whole picture. **And at this moment that looks like a disaster and a display of weakness to all who witnessed it, is in fact Jesus Christ *at his greatest strength* as he remains obedient to his heavenly Father.**

Think about this for a moment. If you had the power to save yourself from an impending death...wouldn't you likely do that? You’d definitely give it serious consideration, right? It is human nature to preserve one’s own life, going to incredible lengths to fight off and delay death. But, Jesus Christ hanging on the cross all the way to his death isn't a display of weakness and helplessness. It’s a paradox, because staying on the cross is actually a display of strength and power as he lives into his Heavenly Father’s will. By staying on that cross Jesus Christ is demonstrating his total and unequivocal commitment to his Heavenly Father’s will.

This is why Jesus can say, as he does elsewhere, “No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down on my own,” (John 10:17-18) and yet can also say, “I obey the will of the Father” (John 6:38, Matthew 26:39). Jesus isn’t helpless and he isn't a puppet on a string. He has absolute freedom just like you and me. But he is committed to doing the will of the father so completely and fully and with such abandonment that he will utterly sacrifice his will and sacrifice himself because of the greater purpose he knows that

God the Father has. So, to come down off the cross would not ultimately be a show of strength and power, but would instead be a display of weakness and helplessness. He would have caved into his own desires for self-preservation. He would have strayed from his commitment to God the Father and his will.

And: By staying committed to the will of the Father, Jesus Christ is then able to do what he could not have done had he strayed from the Father's will: to be the unblemished, perfect sacrifice so that the sins of the world could be borne by him. In the Old Testament, God requires a perfect sacrifice, without blemish, because of the sins of the people. So, when God took things into his own hands to fulfill our side of the covenant himself, and sent Jesus the Son to be that sacrifice once and for all, Jesus had to remain without a blemish. He had to remain perfectly committed to God the Father's will. Anything less than that would be a sin, and would ruin the whole plan.

So, to come down off the cross would be going against the will of the Father. He would have negated everything, and we would still be living under the Old covenant, under the law of the Old Testament, making sacrifices to atone for our sin, and so forth. So, by staying on the cross Jesus Christ demonstrated his absolute strength and power and commitment to the will of God the Father. And therefore, was able to be used by the Father for his redemptive purposes that benefits you and me when we put our trust in Jesus. Instead of being helpless, Jesus is completely helpful: and you and I are the beneficiaries.

Now, at the moment of Jesus' death, that was not apparent to them. His death, to those who were there, was the end. It was a tragedy for those who were close to him, because their understanding of the Messiah, of what it meant for Jesus to be a king, is rooted in a worldly view. They presumed he was there to deliver Israel from foreign oppression and re-establish an earthly Israel. So, an earthly death for him goes against that expectation, and feels like the end of a dream as Jesus dies a couple verses beyond where we read. It's like a victory is taken out of their hands.

Some of you may recall the 1986 World Series. It was one of the all-time classics, and will always be remembered because of one play. It was in the 6th

game of the series, and the Boston Red Sox would win the World Series title over the New York Mets with a victory in this game. Boston had scored a run in the top of the 10th inning to take the lead; all they had to do was get the final three outs to win the World Series. New York got a couple men on base, and then scored a run to tie the game. Now tied again, Boston needed to end the inning so they could come up to bat in the 11th inning. Two outs were in the books. They needed just one more to extend the game and maybe win the World Series. Here's what happened...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18caPNisP2U>

Bill Buckner, unfortunately, made the kind of mistake you usually see 1st graders make on the baseball diamond. Boston couldn't fully recover for game 7, and though they took an early 3-0 lead over the Mets, the Mets went on to win 8-5, taking the World Series title.

Like Boston's team and fans in game 6, who thought for sure they would win the World Series as that ball slowly rolled toward first base and what would have been the third out 99.9% of the time: **The people who followed Jesus thought their victory was just around the corner.** They believed he would save Israel and establish a new Kingdom. And yet here he was hanging on a cross and he couldn't, or wouldn't, save himself. To them it seemed their victory was stolen away when it was least expected. They thought the last chapter was written there on the cross. They thought everything had come to a close; that just when they needed Jesus to be his strongest, they thought that he was in fact his weakest.

Now, you and I know that there is more to the story, and three days later, victory was snatched back from the jaws of defeat. But that chapter wasn't yet written on that day of his death. But if Jesus had *not* died to himself and to the temptation to come down off the cross...**If he had followed the voices of those who cried out, "save yourself," he would have been 100% helpless to the purposes of his Heavenly Father – and to you and me. Instead, it is by his death that he saves us.** He had to sacrifice his will to stay on that cross for the purposes of God. When he looked helpless was actually his greatest act of help and his greatest act of saving, the very thing the mockers wanted him to do.

Now, the ball is our court. **Do we believe and trust that Jesus is helpful for us or not?** According to Jesus' own teaching, the decision is the difference between heaven and hell... This last week (sorry for another baseball illustration) I took my youngest son to his first baseball practice of the season (Gwen signed him up, not me...you know from last week's message that he wouldn't be playing if it had been up to me to sign him up, right?)... Anyway, one of his coaches was wearing a Mariners hat, *and a Yankees sweatshirt*. I mean, how is that even possible? I introduced myself and while smiling I said, "Looks like you've got heaven on your head and hell down here." Jesus can't save someone from being a Yankees fan...but he does save us from the consequences of our sin, and leads us into eternal life, into heaven, in the presence of our holy, righteous, and glorious heavenly father. It's up to us to believe that, to trust him, to take that step of faith.

It didn't take long for those who followed Jesus in his lifetime, to regroup and gather themselves and begin to believe and share this good news of Jesus: That he still saves. He still heals. He still rescues. The cross was not, in fact, the death of the Kingdom and the death of their dreams...it was not a place of helplessness and the end of Jesus saving others. Rather, as paradoxical as it sounds: it was the very instrument that God uses to save us. That's the message they carried forth, all because of Jesus' resurrection on the third day. It changed everything so that they saw the cross of Christ not as a moment of weakness, but a moment of strength. Followers of Jesus died for their proclamations about his resurrection and their beliefs. They gave everything they had to this cause, to the point of giving their lives.

And now it's our turn to be saved, which is possible *because* Jesus stayed on the cross. It's our turn to believe. It's our turn to trust. It's our turn to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, including submitting our wills and our desires to the will of God. That's not easy, as we talked about a couple weeks ago. But that's the call to follow Jesus, who gave himself for you and me. Nothing could be more helpful for you and me than what Jesus did on the cross. And I hope and pray you know the power and the help of the death of Jesus in your life so that his sozo work...his saving work...would be active in your own life. It's the most helpful, saving thing he does. Let's pray...Amen.