

Come to Jesus: Sharing the Gospel with Conviction and Compassion

Thief on a Cross

Luke 23:32-43

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“Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!’ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’ There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’ One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.’ And he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ And he said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:32-43 ESV)

Have you ever considered that the answers to some questions have an immediate impact on our lives?

- You’re driving to a desired destination and along the way you get lost. You pull over at a gas station, walk inside, and ask the clerk, “How do I get to such and such?” The answer the clerk gives can either help you get to your destination or cause you to go even more off course.
- Perhaps you’ve had to give an answer to a question that has direct implications on the life of someone you love and care about. Such that your answer or decision is a matter of life or death.
- I think back to several weeks ago when my wife found an empty Reese’s wrapper in the front seat of my car. When she asked me, “Did you eat this?” I knew right away that my answer would determine the fate of my very life. Our answers matter.

Today we come to a historical account that records Jesus’ last day on Earth. As we look at this account this morning we will be confronted with the three most important questions we will ever ask. Your answer to these questions will determine your identity, the purpose of your life, and most importantly, what will happen to your soul after you die.

Let’s begin by looking verse 32: *“Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.”* The scene is set, three people who have been sentenced to death.

Who are these people?

1. *Two of these people are described as “criminals.”*

In the ancient Roman world, the death sentence was often reserved often for lower-class criminals, slaves, and enemies of the Roman state.¹ These two men were most likely enemies of the state of Rome. The violence they show leading up to the cross as they revile Jesus in Matthew 27 and Mark 15 give us a glimpse into the hatred and evil that filled their hearts. These were wicked men. But who is this mysterious third man? To answer this, we must look back at the previous scene. Look with me at Luke 23:18-25:

“But they all cried out together, ‘Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas’— a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder. Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus, but they kept shouting, ‘Crucify, crucify him!’ A third time he said to them, ‘Why? What evil has he done? I have found in him no guilt deserving death. I will therefore punish and release him.’ But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will.”

2. *This third man sentenced to death is none other than Jesus Christ.*

Regardless of what you personally think about Him, we can all agree that Jesus is a towering figure in the history of the world. One historian put it this way: “If it were possible, with some sort of super-magnet, to pull up out of that history every scrap of metal bearing at least a trace of his name, how much would be left?”² In many respects, this man, Jesus, is inescapable. You probably know one or two people that claim to have a relationship with Him. When you drive through almost any town you will find churches (like this one) where Christians meet to teach about and sing songs to Jesus, a man who lived two millennia ago. This leads us to ask the first most important question we’ll ever ask:

1. Who is Jesus?

How are we to answer this question? By looking at a source that includes details about Him, a source that records what eyewitnesses heard and saw when they were around Him. We need a source that gives us accounts of what He said, what He did, and who He was. In other words, we look to the Bible. How does the Bible answer the question *Who is Jesus?* It answers this question in two ways:

He is God.

All of the Bible points to Jesus as the Son of God. The sinless One, the very image of God, perfect in all His ways. In the Old Testament, from Genesis to Malachi, God promised to one

¹ Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Fortress Press, 1977), 46-50

² Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (Yale University Press, 1999), 1

day send a King, a Messiah, that would save the people from their sin. This is revealed all throughout the New Testament. Jesus Himself testified to this reality when He said in John 10:30 "I and the Father are one" or in John 8:58 when He stated "I tell you the truth... before Abraham was born, I AM!" The Apostle Paul proclaimed this in Colossians 1:15-16, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through Him and for him." Jesus is the very One who sustains the universe! Yet, at the same exact time, the Bible teaches us that:

He is a man.

Jesus was just like us! The Bible tells us in Philippians 2:7 that Jesus "Made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." Do you know what this means? Jesus got hungry, He got thirsty. When He didn't sleep enough, He got tired. When the soldiers pushed the thorns into the skin of His scalp and drove the nails in His wrists, it hurt. He was human. God, the Creator, the Holy One, the Great "I AM" became human.

And it is Jesus, the God-man, that is recorded as being led away to be put to death with two outlaws. The One who did no wrong is now being led to death row with sinners. The very One who formed each of us and gave us life, the One who knows every hair on our heads, the One who hung every star in the sky and named each one, is now being led to die at the hands of those He has created. For each of us to know fully who Jesus is, we must answer the second most important question we'll ever ask:

2. What happened to Jesus?

"And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left." (v. 33)

They crucified Him.

German historian Martin Hengel has written extensively on the topic of Roman crucifixion. At the outset of his book, *Crucifixion*, he described crucifixion as a "barbaric form of execution of the utmost cruelty."³ He later writes:

Crucifixion would include some kind of flogging beforehand, and the victim often carried the beam to the place of execution, where he was nailed to it with outstretched arms, raised up and seated on a small wooden peg. From there, the executioners were given full rein.

Other ancient sources confirm the brutality of crucifixion, one source wrote about his experience watching crucifixions:

³ Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Fortress Press, 1977), 22ff

(Some executioners) have their victims with head down to the ground; some impale their private parts; others drive spikes through their ankles. The victim is hardly recognizable, covered in blood from their flogging wounds. Soon they become food for birds and pickings for dogs as they slowly die.⁴

Jesus is described in John 19 as being flogged and beaten. History tells us that many victims sentenced to crucifixion never made it to the cross because they lost so much blood with the whipping and flogging that they died on the spot. The Old Testament prophet prophesied in Isaiah 54 that Jesus' appearance would be so marred you would not be able to even recognize who He was. As He carried His cross to Golgotha, His back cut open and bleeding profusely scraped against the splintered wood of the cross. They drove spikes through His hands and feet, hoisted up the cross for all to see, and then waited for the Son of God and the two criminals to die.

And yet, in the midst of this, Jesus practices what He urged the disciples to do in Matthew 5:44, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." He prays: "And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'" (v. 34). He is praying that the people that are rejecting Him, reviling Him, and killing Him might experience the forgiveness of His Father.

Not only did they crucify Him:

1. They clothed him in shame.

Notice verse 34: "And they cast lots to divide his garments." What does this mean? One commentator writes:

"As the Son of God hangs naked on the tree a casino breaks out beneath the cross."⁵

In Corrie Ten Boom's book, *The Hiding Place*, describing the experiences of Corrie and her sister Betsy in the Nazi concentration camp during World War II. Corrie writes:

I had read a thousand times the story of Jesus' arrest. How the soldiers had slapped him, laughed at him, flogged him, now such happenings had faces and voices. Friday was the recurring humiliation of medical inspection, we had to maintain our erect hands at side position as we filed slowly past the grinning of staring guards. How there could have been any pleasure in the sight of these stick thin legs and hunger bloated stomachs, I could not imagine. Nor could I see the necessity for the complete undressing. But it was one of these mornings while we were waiting, shivering in the corridor, that another page of the Bible leapt into life for me. "He hung naked on the cross." I had not known, I had not thought. The paintings and the carved crucifixes showed at least a scrap of cloth. But this, I suddenly knew, was the respect and reverence of the artist. But oh-at that time itself, there had been no reverence. No more than I saw in the faces around us now. I leaned toward Betsy ahead of me in line, her shoulder blades stood out sharp and thin beneath her blue-modeled skin.

⁴ Ibid. 9

⁵ James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Eermands, 2015), 697

"Betsy, Betsy, they took his clothes too." Ahead of me, in line, I heard a little gasp, "Oh Corrie, and I never thanked Him. Oh Corrie, and I never thanked Him."⁶

Jesus the Son of God, the One who owns everything, is now stripped of everything. They crucified Him, they clothed Him in shame, and:

2. They reviled him.

"And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!' The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!'³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, 'Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!'" (vv.35-39)

All of this is happening to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 53: *"He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not."* While the revilers of this day are dead and gone, the voice of the reviler is still alive today:

- Those who, like the revilers, look at the claims of the gospel and think "That is all a fairy tale!" and reject Jesus.
- Those who, like the man on the cross, view Jesus a genie in a lamp. "If you are really God, then you would get me out of my mess!"

On that day, Jesus Christ was reviled and rejected. Left alone on the cross, in the middle of two sinners, while those around Him mocked Him as He hanged nearly lifeless on the cross. But in the middle of such chaos and commotion, the second thief speaks up: *"But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.'" (vv. 40-41)*

This man who was previously reviling Jesus with his partner in crime is now rebuking this fellow criminal for reviling Jesus. He reminds this criminal that there is a vast difference between them and Jesus: they are guilty and Jesus is innocent. And then the man utters one of the smallest prayers in all the Bible: *And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." (v. 42)*

This criminal who had made a wreck of his life, who was known for lawlessness, a proud man, and a reviler of God sees himself in a way he has never seen himself before: a sinner. And in that moment, he simultaneously sees Jesus for who He is: the righteous King. So, he prays: Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. I'm sure at this moment the people watching, the guards standing before them, and the other criminals are thinking that this man has gone mad. "Jesus a King? What King gets crucified with criminals?" And yet Jesus' words are recorded in one of the most startling verses in the Bible: *"And he said to him, 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.'" (v. 43)*

Jesus hears this man's plea for mercy and immediately says, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Charles Spurgeon said of this verse:

⁶ Corrie Ten Boom, *The Hiding Place* (Baker Books, 2005), 100

*"This convert was the specimen of what Jesus meant to do. He seemed to say to all the heavenly powers, 'I bring a sinner with me and he is a sample of the rest!'"*⁷

You and I are not much different from this thief:

- *We are all dying.* We, like this sinful man, are all heading towards death. Not one of us knows the day or hour in which we will breathe our last breath.
- *We are all sinners.* Each of us has reviled God, rejected the cross, and lived in rebellion against God's Law.
- *We are all helpless.* Like the criminal, we are all helpless. We cannot pull ourselves from underneath God's judgment any more than this man could pull himself from the cross.

Yet we must wonder, how is it that Jesus can say to those who come to Him by faith, "You will be with me in paradise"? How can we have any assurance that this one named Jesus can forgive us of our sin? After all, not long after Jesus said these words to the criminal, the Bible records at the end of this chapter in verse 46: *"Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!' And having said this he breathed his last."* How can a dead God forgive sin? We must then ask the third and final most important question we'll ever ask:

3. Where is Jesus now?

In 1966 Time magazine's article cover read: *"Is God Dead?"* There were many people who thought it was time to move on, past the existence of God and choose a different kind of worldview. Their views weren't new. In Germany, Friedrich Nietzsche, who died in the year 1900, proclaimed the death of God. He once wrote:

*God died under our knives and who will wipe the blood from our hands? With what water can we cleanse ourselves? What are our churches now but tombs of God?*⁸

In other words, if God is dead, no one can be forgiven and the church is a waste. The Apostle Paul agrees with this logic. He wrote to early Christians in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 15:14-19: *"And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied."*

What he is saying is this: if Jesus is still in the grave, then "those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished." In other words, Jesus' promise, "Today you will be with me in paradise," is worthless if He is still in the grave.

⁷ Charles Spurgeon, *The Dying Thief In A New Light* (Sermon, 1886)

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Parable of the Madman* (The Gay Science, 1884)

See, if Jesus is still in the grave:

- The Bible is worthless
- College Park Church and churches like it are a waste
- This sermon is a lie
- Christian parent, your effort to raise your children to love Jesus is a waste of time
- Christian student, your effort to live out the gospel before your fellow classmates is in vain
- My dear friend wrestling with the claims of Jesus, don't waste your time because it's all a hoax
- And Christian, in the words of Paul, "we are of all people most to be pitied."

IF Jesus is still in the grave. But here is the Good News: The cross isn't the end of the story.

Look with me at Luke 24, recorded three days after Jesus' death:

"But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus." (vv. 1-3)

Why did they not find the body? As the Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:20, *"But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead."*

The book of Acts tells the story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, being stoned to death. The Bible says that as these stones were being hurled at him before he died he looked into heaven and saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God the Father. Jesus was there to welcome Stephen and in effect say, "Stephen in a few moments, when you are dead on earth, you're going to be more alive in heaven than you've ever been." Before D.L. Moody, the famous evangelist of the 1800's, died he said, "Soon you shall read in the newspapers that D.L. Moody is dead. Don't believe it! Because in that moment I shall be more alive than I've ever been." And then in the final moments of his life he said, "Earth recedes, heaven opens, if this be death, it is glorious."⁹

My friends, I stand before you today and proclaim there was not a tomb that was deep enough, there were no grave clothes that were strong enough, and there was not a stone that was heavy enough to keep Jesus Christ in the grave. Where is Jesus now? At the right hand of God the Father, ALIVE!

And because Jesus is alive we, like the criminal, can come to Him with all our sin knowing that He died the death we deserve, buried our sin in the grave, and rose again so that He can say to us with absolute authority: "You are forgiven."

⁹ <http://www.familylife.com/articles/topics/life-issues/challenges/death-and-dying/famous-last-words> (Accessed July 26, 2017).

When we receive that forgiveness, we can be assured that one day when the Lord brings us home, we will stand beside the redeemed criminal that was crucified with Jesus and sing forever and ever: Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, the Lamb has overcome.

If you are here today and want to know more about the gospel, or want to receive this gift of forgiveness, myself and others will be here at the front and would love to pray with you.

Because Jesus is alive you can be forgiven.

John Newton once said this, "When I get to heaven, I shall see three wonders there. The first wonder will be to see people there I did not expect to see; the second wonder will be to miss many persons whom I did expect to see; and the third and greatest wonder of all will be to find myself there."

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