

# **“THE MAN ON THE MIDDLE CROSS.”**

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**Scripture Texts: Luke 23:32-43**

## **Introduction.**

The thief on the cross monologue on Good Friday promoted me to dig into that story more deeply. While not a traditional Easter text, I have discovered the Gospel of Easter is powerfully proclaimed by the thief, so it is fitting for Easter.

## **23:32-33, the crucifixion.**

On Good Friday three criminals were sentenced to death by crucifixion. But in what is certainly the grossest miscarriage of justice in human history, one of those criminals, in fact, by far the worst of those criminals, Barabas, was released by the Jews, and replaced by an innocent man, Jesus, who was the Christ, the Son of God.

Luke uses the most sparing of words, simply saying, “they crucified them,” while describing what was one of the most horrific and cruel means of death ever devised. The suffering and humiliation are beyond description. Scourged with whips, stripped naked, impaled with large iron nails, left hanging exposed to the elements for hours, bodies racked with pain and thirst. For maximum value as a deterrent to any crime, the Romans did the crucifixions in very public places. The crowds were merciless both verbally and physically. Mocking, ridiculing, scorning, insulting, making fun of, laughing, pointing, abusing.

All of this would be horrible enough for one who deserved this kind of justice. But for one who was completely innocent, unimaginable.

To add insult to injury the Romans deliberately crucified Jesus between two criminals. They meant to humiliate Jesus by showing Him to be one among guilty sinners.

## 23:34

This understanding of the context makes Jesus' statement in our text all the more stunning, completely beyond anything anyone would ever expect.

***“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”***

Jesus was speaking to His executioners, pagan Gentiles, who really didn't know what they were doing and who they were doing it to.

These executioners had done hundreds if not more crucifixions. What they were used to hearing from their victims was the most vitriolic venom imaginable, cursing that would make a sailor blush. That kind of extreme suffering would cause one to spew out the most vile words.

It is safe to say the Roman centurions had never heard anything like what Jesus spoke from the cross. Can you imagine the impression Jesus' words must have had? Never before had a victim of their torture prayed for them, let alone forgive them.

Do you feel the power of those words? The power of speaking forgiveness in the midst of a sin-filled situation. Think of the power of forgiveness from one being sinned against to the one who is sinning. Think of what forgiveness does to heart, how it sets us free, how it renews life and love and peace.

Think of what the alternative is. Bitterness, anger, hatred, returning evil for evil, returning ugly words. What does all of that do to your heart? It shrivels it up, turns it dark and cold, mean and miserable. An unforgiving spirit is an ugly spirit.

**Ephesians 4:31-32** Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

We tortured Christ with our sin, we drove in those nails with our pride, lust, impurity, greed, envy, selfishness, self-centeredness, neglect,

foolishness. And He says to us, “Father, forgive them, in my name, by my blood.”

### **23:35-38, the mocking truth.**

There is a saying, “many a truth is spoken in jest.” In our text many a truth is spoken in scoffing, in a mocking tone of voice.

Luke records the mocking of the crowds, the rulers such as the Pharisees, elders and scribes, and the soldiers. There is a great irony in all the mocking. They are trying to spew insults and ridicule, but they actually end up preaching the truth. Everything they say is true.

He saved others, over and over again. He demonstrated His power to save as He healed the demon-possessed, the lepers, the paralytic, the centurion’s servant, Peter’s mother-in-law, the woman’s dead daughter, the blind, deaf and spiritually dead.

He didn’t come to save Himself, He came to save others and that’s exactly what He did. He didn’t just sympathize with them or pity them or say He would pray for them, He saved them, delivered them, rescued them from all their troubles. Jesus came to save others.

And they mocked Him saying He was the king of the Jews. Truer words were never spoken.

They all had the false impression that a real king would save himself, would do what was in his own best interest. No Messiah worth His salt would get nailed to a Roman cross. Jesus doesn’t fit any of their preconceived categories. And He often still doesn’t.

People today have so many preconceived ideas about who Jesus is, what Jesus should do, how He should meet their expectations. And when He doesn’t come through, they are disappointed when He doesn’t cure a cancer, He doesn’t save a child’s life, He doesn’t meet a need, provide something lacking, fix a broken relationship, get us out of a tight situation.

All the accusations are true. Jesus is everything they say He is, the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, who will tear down the temple and in three days rebuild it.

### **23:39, the first criminal.**

The great irony continues when we hear the angry words of the first criminal, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” Jesus was like, “I am!” That was exactly what Jesus was doing in that very moment. The problem was the wicked thief was too proud, too blinded by his evil deeds to see it.

In the supreme crisis of his life, on the brink of eternity, in the hardness of His bitter heart he only wants rescue and relief without repentance. He doesn't want Jesus, he doesn't see Him as King to be followed. Jesus was just a tool to be used for his own purposes.

How is it his condemnation did not cause him to fear God and cry out for mercy? Why didn't he tremble when the hand of God was so heavy on him? It never entered his mind to humble himself, say he was sorry, repent and should change.

### **23:40-42, the other criminal.**

This is one of the most astonishing conversions recorded in history. What an utterly unexpected, unbelievable picture of the extravagant grace of God. This man quite literally stood on the very brink of hell, and in the last moment was saved from eternal death and raised up to heaven in a remarkable display of repentance and faith.

Behind all of this is the glorious, powerful inner working of the Holy Spirit. What a display of the grace of God at work transforming a hard heart.

This man had spent a lifetime killing his conscience, silencing any voice of right or wrong. Suddenly he has the clearest vision of truth and life and faith. And all of this toward a man hanging on a Roman instrument of torture. He sees in Jesus the author of life in the hour of His shameful dying. To see the glory of God in the disgrace of the cross. This is Easter.

In just 45 words his confession contains all the elements of the Gospel necessary for salvation.

He feared God. That means God was real to him. God was actually God. He understood the holiness of God and the appropriate response to such a God, to fear God. He believes in the world to come there is judgment, punishment and reward.

He confesses the justice of God, that he rightfully deserves God's just judgment on his sin. No excuses, no cover up, no defensiveness, no blaming, no playing the victim. He understands his sin is against God and under the penalty of death. He humbles himself by giving a sincere confession of his great crimes.

He confesses the righteousness of Jesus, that He is innocent, He has done nothing wrong. The sin Jesus was being punished for was not Jesus' but his own.

He confesses Jesus has a kingdom and therefore Jesus is a real king with a real kingdom.

He believes in a resurrection to a life beyond this one, that the soul doesn't die with the body. He casts himself completely on the mercy of Christ. Remember me when you get to your kingdom.

He affirms salvation is by grace alone, apart from any works. He has nothing to offer Jesus. He affirms if he is to be saved it will be all Jesus' doing. He puts all his faith in a suffering Savior. He simply prays and asks to be saved.

How do you explain a desperately lost, dying soul racked with pain believing in a kingdom he cannot see, in a King wearing a crown of thorns, wearing a robe of nakedness, whose body is shredded by Roman whips, whose entourage is a crowd of blasphemers and haters, and whose enemies appear to have defeated Him? (Dale Ralph Davis).

Never has there been a clearer proclamation of the Gospel. Confession, repentance, faith, hope, trusting in grace alone. There are multitudes in heaven thanking God for this story that changed their own lives, perhaps in their last hour.

Do you notice both men are the same. Both guilty of a crime, both suffering crucifixion, both see the sign above Jesus, both hear Jesus'

words, and both ask Jesus to save them. And all of us have all of that in common with those two men.

So what is the difference? There is an great divide between these two hearts. It is the divide that separates every human heart. This is a picture of all humanity. The infinite difference is heard in what Jesus said to the two criminals.

To the first one Jesus gave no answer, just silence. That is His answer to one who has no fear of God, no humility, no faith. Luke tells this story to say to us, don't be that man.

To the second one Jesus says something altogether gloriously different.

**23:43, paradise.**

“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Every word is rich with meaning.

Truly I say to you – it is absolutely certain. Christ has this power and authority.

Today – now, with immediacy, no delay. Not when I come again.

With me – personal, His real presence. Not just remember, not just in my thoughts, but with me.

Paradise – something truly wonderful.

This is the great assurance of every dying soul, in the moment of death we are transported into the presence of our Lord. The moment we depart this earth, we are with Christ.

How does most hopeless, lest deserving person receive the most hopeful promise from the greatest act done by the greatest Being?

**The man on the middle cross.**

What is this thieving, murdering, insurrectionist, doing in heaven? He would say, “The man on the middle cross said I could come. In my last hour He took away my lifetime of sin.”

Zaccheaus, you lying, deceiving, embezzling money grabber, why are you in heaven? The man on the middle cross delivered me from my idolatrous love of money, and said I could come.

Woman at the well who had five husbands and was living with another man, why are you in heaven? Because the man on the middle cross told me the truth about my sexual sin, my ungodly and unholy living and He told me where to get living water rather than the polluted water I had been drinking. He said I could come.

Prodigal son who rebelled against your father and squandered your father's inheritance in selfish sinful living, what are you doing in heaven? The man on the middle cross while I was still a long way off drew my heart back to my father who forgave me. He said I could come.

Peter, you denier of Jesus, and not just once but three times, what are you doing in heaven? The man on the middle cross broke my proud heart and brought me to tears, and renewed my love for Him, He said I could come.

Thomas, you doubter, what are you doing in heaven? The man on the middle cross showed me the scars in His hands and feet and side and mercifully took away my sinful, proud doubt. He said I could come and he told me even those who don't have sight, but have faith can come.

You demon-possessed Gadarene, who said you could be in heaven? The man on the middle cross defeated Satan and put all the principalities and powers to open shame and triumphed over them on His cross. He set me free from my demons and said I could come.

You blind man, how did you see to come to heaven? The man on the middle cross showed His power over all sickness and disease and disability, and had mercy on me and opened my eyes to see Him and believe.

Paul, you chief among sinners who blasphemed and even killed followers of Jesus, why are you in heaven? Because the man on the middle cross knocked me off my horse and told me I was persecuting Him with my words and actions, and called me to be His follower.

**I Timothy 1:15-16** Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. 16 But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to [all] those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

There's grace at the middle cross for the worst of sinners, so there's grace at the cross for you. The only reason any of us will be in heaven is because, "The man on the middle cross said I could come."

### **Implications and application.**

Jesus is ready in a moment to cleanse and forgive all of even the worst sins, and so completely that all penalty and guilt is gone and we can pass from this life directly to heaven. There is no halfway, no purgatory, no holding pattern, no time out or remedial step.

A man with ten thousand sins, gained heaven by pure grace, nothing more. May our pride not keep us from trusting not in ourselves but in Christ alone.

Watching Christ die the thief saw a sweet sacrifice, a life-giving suffering, a holy offering pleasing to God in its innocence and purity, able to take away the sins of the world. A life destined to die was replaced by eternal life. This is the glory of the resurrection and Easter.

You can do no better in this life than to have this man as your teacher and guide, as your spiritual mentor. He leads us to Christ. This thief is the first fruits of Easter glory

If Christ can do this for a dying man from a cross, what more can He do for you from His eternal throne in heaven.

In the light of the resurrection, how does anyone not lift up the eyes of faith to Jesus? How does anyone not worship and adore Him with all their heart?

### **Prayer:**

Holy Father in heaven, all glory, honor, praise and thanks belong to you and to your Son for this day you planned from all eternity. While we were

nothing but sinners, dead in our trespasses and sins and children of wrath, you in the richness of your mercy and the greatness of your love, saved us by grace through the blood of Jesus. Look on us all with that same mercy that you looked on the thief on the cross and open our hearts to the same redeeming love. For this great gift may we live in the freedom of your forgiveness and freely give it to all who sin against us. Make this day a new beginning in living for you and walking in your will and ways for the glory of Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.