

IT TAKES A THIEF LUKE 23:39-43

Over the last seven weeks we've been talking about sharing our faith and helping folks know Jesus. We've entitled our series, "[People Last Forever.](#)" *For they do!*

And this evening, I've got one more installment...

I want us to look at an episode from the cross...

Luke 23:39, "Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed (Jesus), saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us." But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

A strange thing happened on the way to heaven...

That's where Jesus was headed. Work your way through Chapter 23 and you'll follow Jesus from Pilate's Judgment Hall to the cross on Mount Calvary.

By the time we get to our text His mission is about finished. The price will soon be paid. Jesus was sent to do the Father's will - then bear the sins of the world.

In the next few verses, the weight of sin comes crashing down on His innocent shoulders. The sky grows dark. The Temple veil is torn in two. The Lamb receives His load. For

the crime of sin - *all sin, every sin* - an executioner named "*Death*" will pull the switch, and the current of sin will pass through Jesus' sinless body. When Jesus commits His Spirit back to His Father in heaven, sin's debt will have been paid in full.

And evidence of His triumph is what follows - both in heaven and on earth. The spiritual and physical realms are served notice that the keys to life are now in new hands. Life and death are under new management.

Satan was trounced and Jesus is now victorious!

Jesus proves it first to spiritual principalities and powers... While a few brave disciples lay His body in a borrow tomb, Jesus' Spirit dive bombs into Paradise where He declares Himself the promised Messiah, and the Victor over sin. He sweeps up all His OT followers, and ushers them to heaven into God's very presence.

The spiritual realm is forever altered. The torn veil in the Temple was a symbol that all the barriers between God and humanity had been removed. The coast is now clear. The door stands wide open. The only issue remaining between us and God is our loyalty to Jesus.

And in 72 hours, Earth will also get the news of Jesus' triumph. The stone will roll away, and His body will bounce from the grave surging with new life. Death can't hold Him. The grave has no claim on Him.

After His resurrection Jesus will linger on Earth for nearly six weeks. He provides instruction to reassure His doubting disciples, and undeniable evidence to provoke faith in future

generations. After forty days of infallible proofs the Lord Jesus ascended to heaven.

*This is why I say, at the time of our passage, **Jesus is on the cross, but He's on His way to heaven.***

His work is near completion. A couple more strokes and the artist will finish His masterpiece of salvation.

The end of Jesus' long road *from heaven to earth, and back again*, is now in sight. He's shedding His blood. He's laying down His tired and broken body.

Jesus is on His last leg. He can see the finish line...

How strange, that in the process of saving the world, Jesus reaches out to a single soul - *a criminal, no less.*

You would think an artist putting the final touches on a painting wouldn't want to be bothered? *Not now...*

But not Jesus! A strange thing happens on the way to heaven... **Jesus takes somebody with Him!**

Imagine what's at stake on the cross. Our Savior, the Lord Jesus, is securing salvation for the whole world.

All people - past and future people - everyone who will ever gain access to heaven will be there because of what Jesus did in those six hours on the cross.

There's never been a more decisive moment in human history than *that day, on that hill*, in Jerusalem.

And God was in control of everything that occurred. In those six hours dozens of biblical prophecies were fulfilled. Every move that Jesus made and every word that Jesus spoke, was

foreshadowed by Scripture. God oversaw His Son hanging from those Roman gallows...

That's why our text seems so strange and out of place at first. Why does the holy sacrifice ordained by God - planned before Creation - get interrupted by a conversation between two common criminals?

Their banter back and forth - their jeers and desperate pleas - seem to defile the sacred moment.

Like a passing train in the middle of a wedding ceremony, the conversation between these men seems to be an unwanted interruption. I read verses 39-41, and I'm tempted to shout at the two thieves, **"How bout you guys piping down until the Savior is finished."**

Yet here's a picture of the heart of God we need to see... Jesus is focused on the world He wants to save.

I believe that on the cross, in His spirit, Jesus saw every face of every person who has - or will - ever live.

He's dies to save the world. He's fighting spiritual battles His onlookers know nothing about. Yet in the midst of it a thief asks to go to heaven, *and rather than view it as a bother, Jesus grants him his request.*

Imagine, the scene later in Paradise: the Author of Salvation, the Lord of Glory, the King of the Universe, the Darling of Heaven crosses the finish line to the cheers of ten billion angels and saints - and a convict just executed for his crimes is allowed to tag along, and share in His triumphed. The Savior finishes His work of eternal salvation... *with a thief by His side.*

Here's a quote that gets at what I'm trying to say, "Jesus was crucified, not in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves."

We tend to categorize the Crucifixion as a religious event. The crucifix has become a religious symbol.

The only time some people talk about the cross is at church. Apparently, church is where the cross belongs.

For most people the cross is a artifact to be revered by spiritual folks... *But I don't think so.* The cross was a means to an ends, it was never to be an end in itself.

Jesus wasn't crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves - the cross isn't to be hung on a wall, or decorated, or turned into a relic... It was a tool in the hand of a loving God who wanted to save sinners... *like thieves.* The point of Calvary's cross was and is to get sinners to heaven.

I love the incident in our text. At first it seems so out of place... We see the crucifixion of Jesus as a sacred event. We're in awe of all that happened on the cross.

When Jesus cries out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?" We're amazed at the mysterious interaction going on between the Father and the Son.

We're hushed by the holiness of the moment. We wonder at the transaction that's being finalized.

But *this* event hammers home a vital truth. It snaps us back to the purpose of the cross. In the midst of this high and holy moment, Jesus snatches up a rough and tumble criminal by the scruff of the neck, and takes a convict with Him to

heaven. Here's the bottom line to the work of Jesus on the cross... **it takes a thief.**

Realize, in our text, the Greek word translated, "**criminal**" means "**one who uses violence to rob openly.**" The guy Jesus saved that day wasn't a white collar criminal. He wasn't convicted for credit card theft. He was guilty of armed robbery - murder and mayhem.

This fellow was a bandit, a desperado. He may've popped a cop in the process. I believe he was chosen by God to be next to Jesus because he was the most unlikely to go to where Jesus was headed - *to heaven.*

In fact, look at his partner in crime. The other crucified criminal taunts Jesus. He has no respect.

He's rebellious to the end. Now hanging on either side of Jesus, I get the impression these two men hung together in life. They both were unsavory characters.

This thief deserved death, but Jesus gave him paradise... *and why?* Well, it had nothing to do with the work of his hands - this man's hands were nailed to a piece of wood... Nor did it have anything to do with the places he might go to spread God's kindness - his feet were also nailed to the board... It certainly wasn't because he decided to join and get involved in church - when you're nailed to a cross you can't go to church...

There was only one thing this boy could do, and that was to repent and believe in Jesus for his salvation.

This was the only thing he could do, but it was the only thing he was required to do! We all come to God the same

way - by God's grace through faith in Jesus. Ask this thief what made Good Friday so good, and he would have sung the praises of God's grace.

I often think of this boy's parents...

His life of crime burned any bridges that previously existed between he and his folks. I doubt they were at his crucifixion. They probably stayed home to spare themselves the shame and embarrassment.

And unless they were on-site - close enough to hear his conversation with Jesus, they would've gone to bed that night, and every other night for that matter, assuming their son was frying in the flames of hell.

This is why unless you're there in a person's final moments - you really don't know what occurs between them and Jesus. This thief on the cross forever proves there is such a thing as **a death bed conversion...**

I remember a funeral I once officiated. Sadly, only three people showed up - the deceased's mother, his sister, and her son - *who I'm sure was forced to come.*

The sparse crowd was evidence of the irresponsible and selfish life this man had lived. He died from cirrhosis of the liver - literally drank himself to death. Imagine the pain he caused the folks who loved him.

But what all the people over the years who'd rubbed dirty shoulders with this guy failed to see was what I had the privilege of witnessing just two days earlier.

I paid him a visit, and asked if he wanted to make Jesus the Lord of his life. He did, and He received God's forgiveness.

An immediate peace settled over this dying man. His attitude changed. In a moment, God worked a miracle and took a criminal to paradise.

I've heard it said, "God has included one death bed conversion in the Bible to hold out hope - but only one, so as not to produce a false hope." I agree with that.

God is gracious, and kind, and merciful. *If there's breath, there's hope!* Yet no one who's heard the Gospel once, is guaranteed a second opportunity.

Here's what I'm trying to say...

Today, priests, bishops, and archbishops - in huge, ornate cathedrals - are parading down church aisles, wearing pious robes, and carrying ceremonial crosses.

They're performing their Good Friday duties faithfully and formally. But such a priest would never do so, with a disheveled homeless man by his side... or with a broken, humbled prostitute in tow... or with a convicted criminal fresh from the chain gang attached to his hip...

These kinds of people would be a distraction to the clergy. They would interfere with the pastor or priest's ecclesiastical work - but not for the Savior of the world and the work we celebrate today. In saving the world... even on His way to heaven... Jesus took a thief!

I think from the Savior's perspective, Jesus might've been embarrassed to do the work of salvation without saving someone in particular as it was being done.

He knew that eventually you and I and millions more would join the ranks of the redeemed. But Jesus wanted to cross the finish line with immediate spoils.

He didn't want to have to wait a second. The Savior desired something to show for His efforts, so He took with Him a thief to heaven. It was a sweet victory.

Could God have done anything more to prove how much he loves the lost, and last, and least of us? That in saving the world... Jesus took a common criminal.

Realize, Jesus isn't enamored with crosses today. They hold for Him no sentimental attraction. It was *the spoils of salvation* that made *the toil of salvation* so worthwhile. The cross was just a tool to save people.

The Savior refused to enter heaven empty-handed.

That's why a strange thing happened on the way to heaven... the Savior of all mankind *took a thief*.

Here's another way to think about it...

Jesus hangs on the cross. Two criminals hang next to Him. All three men are hanging together. If Jesus is really into salvation why doesn't He invite the people with whom He's hanging out to go to heaven with Him?

For Jesus to have left a willing soul on the cross, it would've been a mockery of all He stood for and wanted to accomplish. It would've been inappropriate for the Savior to arrive in heaven all by Himself.

And I think the same should be true for us. *Do you really want to go to heaven all by your lonesome?*

What about the guys you hang out with everyday?

“But Pastor, those guys are bandits, and thugs, and criminals - they don’t deserve God’s love.” And neither do you... When will we get it, being a criminal simply means you’re a candidate for God’s grace...

“But I’m too busy with church stuff, and Bible Study, to carry on a conversation with such people...” if that’s the case, you’ve got some serious priority problems.

You’ve hung the cross in a cathedral - between two candles. You’ve forgotten it belongs not in a church, or in a religious setting - but on a hill in plain view of everyone - next to a public road - between sinners.

Here’s what I think... tonight’s text, this incident with the thief, proves that God wants folks to go to heaven in bunches. *Even the Savior took somebody with Him!*

Here’s the place for you and I to start... *What about your family who need Jesus - your spouse, or children, or uncles and aunts, or nieces and nephews - have you given up on the people with whom you hang?*

Remember the story in Acts 16 when the earthquake rocked the jail in Philippi. Paul and Silas were set free! And when the warden of the prison saw the miracle, he asked them, **“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”**

But here’s what I want you to notice. The focus of Paul’s answer wasn’t just the jailor. Paul also included the people with whom he hung out – his own family...

Paul replied, **“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.”** That doesn’t mean the

jailor decided for his family. Like the criminals on the cross everyone has to make their own choice. But God likes to save people in bunches.

We're told Paul and Silas, "spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house... And immediately he and all his family were baptized." Paul preached to the jailor and his posse', and they all responded with faith. When all received, all get saved.

If you're picking grapes from a vine do you pick them one by one? No, it's better to pick them in bunches.

Grapes come in clusters - and so do people. When God saves one, why not save the people around him?

Why not save the gang with the gang member?

The team with the teammate?

The jailor's family with the jailor? *Why not save the criminal, even as He saves the whole world?*

Salvation is a bandwagon, and as it rolls along God wants anybody and everybody to jump on board.

There's another story I'm sure you remember...

A wild man, full of demons - tortured and tormented - was held up in the caves east of the Sea of Galilee.

Here was another unlikely candidate for salvation.

At one point, his family and friends tried to tie him down to protect him from himself, but when the demons inflicted him he would break his shackles and restraints. It became impossible for the man to live in society, so he roamed the barren hillside in isolation.

That is, until Jesus met him. Jesus cast out the demons, and set the man free. And what was said of this man afterward is the perfect picture of what Jesus does for everyone He saves, “(they) found the man from whom the demons had departed, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.”

Here’s a man who was gloriously and miraculously saved. He’d experienced a personal miracle in his life.

It’s no wonder, when Jesus boards the boat to leave, this man pleads to go with Him. But that’s when Jesus instructs His new disciple, “Return to your own house, and tell what great things God has done for you.”

Rather than go overseas, the man was to over see the salvation of those nearby. When salvation comes, like a wildfire God wants it to spread to those close by.

Christians today talk about *personal salvation* - that God has a *personal plan* for your life - *and He does*.

But sometimes we say it as if all God cares about is me and my welfare. *My direction in life and my home in heaven* end up God’s sole priorities... *How foolish*.

If Jesus took time out from saving the world to take a thief to heaven - *then how can my relationship with God ignore the salvation of the people around me?*

If I’m so busy with my life, or with serving God, that I ignore the people I hang out with; then something is wrong! **Let’s not forget that people last forever.**

A strange thing happened on Jesus' way to heaven... **He took a thief.** And the same strange thing should be happening on our way to heaven...

Why would God save one, when He could save two? *Why just you,* if He can save the people with you?

Don't forget, God likes to save people in bunches.

Here's one truth we learn from the cross of Jesus Christ...
In saving the world, Jesus took a thief...