

The Thief on the Cross

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[0:00] Let's read from God's Word now in page 884 in Luke chapter 23. Luke chapter 23. After this, we only have another six sermons, and that's just finished the Gospel of Luke.

! We started it in 2021. Luke chapter 23, verse 39.

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. Heavenly Father, bring your ancient and powerful word into the present, so that it can be heard and delivered with all the freshness of a new day, with all the immediacy of a friend's embrace, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

[1:30] Amen. It was the best of times. It was the worst of times. So begins a tale of two cities.

For one criminal nailed to our own cross, it was the worst of times, and yet the best of times. It was the end of life, and the beginning of life.

It was the end of the old, the beginning of the new. It was the end of pain, and the beginning of paradise. It took him to be crucified, for him to come to his senses, because it was there on that cross, this criminal met with Jesus.

Of all the places where someone has become a Christian, this criminal boasts the strangest. But it was here, where even though he was dying in pain, the criminal experienced peace with God.

In these verses, in Luke 23, verses 39 through 43, we have a record of the best of times and the worst of times. The justification of Jesus as the King of Israel, and the justification of a criminal as a sinner saved by grace.

[2:45] The story of the thief on the cross points to Jesus, who, as the Lord, saves through his death on the cross. I want to see four things from this passage today.

First of all, the foolishness of the cross, the problem of the cross, the cry of the cross, and the power of the cross. This dying criminal was the first human being who had been saved directly through the cross of Jesus.

The first, but not the last. For since him, billions of people have cried out to Jesus, Remember me.

Today, as you hear the gospel, wherever you're sitting, will this be the best of times for you?

Well, first of all then, from verse 39, the foolishness of the cross, the foolishness of the cross.

There's something almost farcical about the scene painted for us in verse 39.

Here we have Jesus, the Lord of life, love, and glory, and he's hanging on a Roman cross. He is being executed in the harshest way known to mankind, dying as the worst of criminals.

[3:59] But he's not alone. To his right and his left are other criminals being executed. In this verse, Luke calls them criminals. But the word means workers of evil, evil workers.

Matthew describes them as armed robbers or perhaps even terrorists, like Barabbas. They were genuinely evil men. Perhaps you've heard the expression a rose between thorns.

Never has this saying been more appropriate than here in Luke 23, 39, where the Lord Jesus, the rose of heaven, was crucified between the thorns of an evil world.

Jesus doesn't belong here. Jesus belongs on the throne of heaven, receiving the praise of angels undressed in glorious robes. He should be surrounded by the majesty of heaven's purity, not the misery of earth's evil.

It doesn't feel right. It's like when you see someone completely out of context. Perhaps you're on holiday in England, you're eating in a restaurant, and your neighbors from back home walk in.

[5:11] And for a second, you don't register their presence because, well, you see them out of context. And here we see Jesus hanging on a Roman cross between criminals, the ultimate rose between thorns.

It all seems so very foolish. That in the first instance, the Christ of God, the author of life, would die at all. And then in the second instance, that he be surrounded, not by adoring crowds, but by evil terrorists.

No wonder then, that later on, the apostle Paul would say that to the Greeks, who for all their philosophical wisdom thought that the cross of Jesus was utter foolishness.

Still today, many people in our city, mostly from an Islamic background, believe that the Christians' insistence upon the death of Jesus on the cross is foolish blasphemy.

The thought that Jesus could die as a criminal, it's beyond them. To add to the misery of Jesus, one of the thorns being crucified beside him shouts abuse.

[6:20] Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us. It's a criticism we've heard before. We saw this last week in verse 35 from the Jewish leaders gathered around the cross from verse 37, the Roman soldiers.

It was entirely natural for Jesus to have wanted to save himself from the agony of the cross. No one wants to die this way. Even here on the cross, Jesus has been tempted by the devil to use his power to save himself from the way of the cross, to save himself from death.

Even now, in his dying hour, Jesus has been tempted and tested as to the firmness of his resolve to die as the savior of sinners. The kind of Christ the Jewish leaders thought they needed was a strong warrior who would lead Judea in a rebellion against the Romans and win its freedom.

They did not want a Christ who would die on a Roman cross. They wanted a Christ who would save them from the Romans, not a Christ who would save them from their sins.

What this criminal and what all was watching on didn't realize was that because Jesus was the Christ, he couldn't save both himself and them.

[7:45] The only way he could save them was by dying for them. Of course, remember, we're looking back at this with 2,000 years of hindsight. To all gathered that day and to this condemned criminal, it's so farcical.

A king dying on a cross, a rose between thorns, a Christ who cannot save himself and is dying to the sounds of mocking insults.

This is the apparent foolishness of the cross, which in the economy of God is the wisdom of the cross. For there was no other way for a sinful humanity to be saved from itself other than by the death of Christ.

They may all laugh at Jesus because it all looks so wrong, but we're not laughing at Jesus that day. We're worshiping him. We're praising him. We're falling at his feet in adoration because we know that in his death we have life and through his condemnation we have forgiveness and through his weakness we have hope.

So we have the foolishness of the cross, first of all. And then secondly, in verses 40 and 41, we have the problem of the cross. The problem of the cross.

[9:08] The other rebuked him saying, do you not fear God? Since we're under the same sentence of condemnation, and we indeed justly, for we're receiving the due reward of our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.

They say, whether it's true or not, that there's nothing quite like impending death to focus the mind. The one criminal filled with self-pity mocked Jesus.

The other criminal focused his thoughts on the situation he was facing. He was no less evil than the other man. He had been a terrorist the same as the other man.

He had probably murdered, and he was not the kind of person you wanted to be seen with. But for all that, the pain of the cross and his impending death was bringing him to his senses.

And he says to the other criminal, do you not fear God? Clearly, this man's a Jew. Many people cursed God upon their deathbeds, but not this man.

[10:15] He knew that there was far more to life and death than meets the eye, and he realized that what's of first importance is your attitude to God.

Don't you fear God, he said, since we're under the same sentence of condemnation? This man knew that he was going to die, and he's not going to waste his last breaths pouring scorn on another victim of the Romans.

But again, is it not the height of irony that Jesus, the Son of God, the innocent and pure Lamb of God, should be suffering the fate of a condemned man?

Jesus had never murdered, terrorized, or robbed anybody. Rather, he had healed, loved, and had compassion upon them. For what crime was Jesus being condemned and treated like the worst of terrorists?

Back to this man on the cross who spoke in Jesus' defense. This man knew that it should have been Barabbas on that central cross. He knew enough to know that Jesus was not guilty of the things he was accused of and was taking the place of Barabbas.

[11:31] So he said to the other criminal, he said, we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our sins, but this man has done nothing wrong. This man knew that he was receiving his just rewards, that he deserved to be condemned by capital punishment, but he also knew that Jesus had done nothing wrong.

Perhaps he had heard about Jesus before from the mouths of other people, or perhaps he was just watching the way that Jesus was suffering beside him. This man may have been a violent person, but he wasn't stupid.

He had eyes and ears in his head and he knew that Jesus was nothing like him at all. He was full of hate and violence, but Jesus full of love and compassion. This man in his death was saying things we might have wished the Jewish leaders had said all the way through.

We might have wished that the chief priests and the Pharisees and the Sadducees had understood this, that Jesus was altogether righteous and innocent. This dying man, this terrorist, was wiser than the entire leadership of the nation of Israel.

So here then again we meet this ultimate problem of the cross. Luke's taking us back to this again and again and again. What is an innocent man doing, dying as a condemned criminal?

[13:01] As we saw a couple of weeks ago, the Roman proconsul was convinced of Jesus' innocence. Pilate. Headed, King of Galilee was convinced of Jesus' innocence.

And now, so is this unnamed criminal. In fact, everyone knows that Jesus is an innocent man except for the Jewish leadership. But for fear or for foul, there's Jesus and he's on the cross.

What is an innocent, righteous man doing, dying as a condemned criminal? That is the ultimate problem of the cross. The cross by this world's measure was a great injustice.

Many people, though, have been unjustly executed, innocent of the crimes of which they were accused. Never has a man been innocent such as Jesus was. However, given that this world's measures never have the final say over God, there remains only one other explanation.

It's the explanation given by the text a few verses before. Jesus was taking the place of the Jewish criminal Barabbas on the cross.

[14:17] Jesus was Barabbas' substitute. It should have been Barabbas on that cross, but Jesus suffered the death Barabbas deserved to die. Jesus died as a substitute.

That's the answer to the problem of the cross. He's not paying the price of his own crimes. He's paying for the crimes of another. Jesus, the innocent one, dies for Barabbas, the guilty one. Jesus dies so that Barabbas may live. But we know that Jesus was paying the price for more than Barabbas. He was paying the price for us all.

He was bearing the punishment for the guilt of a sinful world. It reminds us of the cry of John the Baptist right at the beginning of the gospel. Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world.

On that cross, Jesus was your substitute. Because of our sinful rebellion against God, it should have been us on the cross, but Jesus took our place.

[15:25] Jesus bore the curse of our sin and guilt. Jesus died that we might live. Jesus was condemned that we might be forgiven. Jesus was forsaken by God that we might be reconciled to God and have the sure hope of eternal life.

The problem we encounter at the cross is the praise we offer at the cross, for it's there we see the Son of God loving me and giving himself for me.

It may be all too much foolishness to the world, but to us it is the wisdom of God and we shall forever worship Jesus for his infinite, eternal, and unchangeable love for us.

The problem of the cross. Thirdly, the cry of the cross. The cry of the cross. For all that the cross was the darkest of places, there was, even in these final moments, a ray of hope.

The criminal who had spoken for Jesus now spoke to Jesus and he said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

[16 : 35] And he said it once, the verbal form says he said it twice and he would not stop until Jesus had hurt him. This man knew he was dying as a criminal.

This man knew that he deserved the punishment he was receiving. This man knew that according to Jewish tradition, he was not only suffering now for the sins he had committed, but that he would be cursed eternally for his crimes.

He was enduring an earthly hell on the cross, but the eternal hell to which he was going was far greater. This man knew that he deserved what he was getting and would get, but by crying out to Jesus, he was crying out for mercy, which is by definition undeserved.

The recent scandal of that unsuccessful execution of the woman in America has brought the question of capital punishment under renewed scrutiny. Whatever the rights and wrongs, whatever you think about capital punishment, I was confused, deeply confused, when I read an article by a lazy journalist saying that she deserved mercy.

She deserved mercy. But by definition, no one deserves mercy. By definition, mercy is never deserved.

[18 : 03] Mercy is an unmerited gift. And this criminal on the cross who had committed far worse crimes than that woman in America didn't deserve any kind of mercy at all.

Jesus remembered me when you come into your kingdom. Oh, if only the religious leaders of Israel had cried that out, rather than the two words crucify him.

If only they had adopted the mindset of this repentant criminal rather than their proud arrogance.

Here then we have the prayer of a dying sinner offered to a dying savior.

A dying sinner to a dying savior. this criminal's life has now come to an end. He is even in this place of execution, in this last moment, thinking of the life to come.

And in this worst of places, in this worst of times, he's come to his senses and realized that all the way through life he's been wrong, most terribly wrong, but that as long as he had breath in his lungs, it wasn't too late.

[19 : 12] So we prayed, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Now I don't know how much this dying criminal understood about the kingdom of Jesus.

Did he appreciate the fullness of the divinity of Christ, the glory of the resurrection, the beauty of the peace of heaven? Could he have preached a sermon on the theology of the cross?

did he have the knowledge to formulate a great statement of faith like that of the early church? Not a bit of it, but this he knew.

As a dying man looks to a dying Savior, he looks for life in the world to come. And we ask, what can this criminal offer to Jesus? He couldn't offer him a faithful past, for the life he had lived had been one filled with crime and terror, he couldn't offer him any kind of future service, for his life on earth was limited to a matter of minutes.

He couldn't have promised a lifetime of missionary endeavor. He had nothing to offer Jesus except a wasted life filled with sin.

[20 : 33] Well, he could have sung the words of the hymn Rock of Ages, nothing in my hand I bring, nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I claim.

When we come to Jesus for salvation, we come with nothing except a life of wrong turns and wasted opportunities. We come with empty hands or we don't come at all.

But perhaps the strongest message from this criminal dying on the cross is that as long as you've got breath in your lungs, it is never too late to turn to Jesus for salvation.

As long as you've got breath in your lungs. We've heard the saying, better late than never. And never is this more true than when it comes to becoming a Christian.

You may only have seconds yet to live, but that's long enough to cry out to Jesus to remember you. The man who gives Jesus only 30 seconds of his life is entirely as justified before God as the man who gives him a lifetime.

[21 : 45] The man who gives Jesus 30 seconds of his life is entirely as justified before God as the man who gives him a lifetime. Is there anyone here who knows that they have nothing to offer Jesus except wrong turns, missed opportunities, would you like this dying man cry out to Jesus today, remember me, remember me.

You know it was this man, this man, not the fine religious leaders of Israel who were justified before God. And you too shall be, if you will but cry out to Jesus today, remember me.

the foolishness of the cross, the problem of the cross, the cry of the cross, and lastly from verse 43, the power of the cross, the power of the cross, that he said to him, truly I say to you, today you'll be with me in paradise.

This is one of the most powerful and poignant verses in the Bible. with virtually his dying breath, with no concern for himself and his own pain, Jesus turns to this criminal and says, today I say, truly I say to you, today you'll be with me in paradise.

It's a statement of beautiful promise for this criminal, but it's an even more powerful statement about the Jesus who's dying on the cross, saving not himself, but saving this criminal.

[23 : 25] Is this not the entire reason for the cross in the first place, that through Jesus' death he would give others life, that through his pain he would give them paradise, his death, my life, his pain, my paradise?

In the Bible, paradise is a word that's often used to describe the Garden of Eden. God created all things perfect and said of it, behold it is very good. Why don't you think in your mind for a second of the incredible colors in the Garden of Eden, all the colors of the rainbow and the trees and the grass and the sky.

And then I want you to think of all the harmonious music in the Garden of Eden. And then think of the smell of the freshness and aromatic perfume of all the flowers in the Garden of Eden.

There couldn't be a greater possible contrast between the horrific gruesomeness of the cross and the harmonic glory of God's paradise.

It's the contrast between the bomb-cratered trenches of Flanders in the First World War and the tranquil green fields of England. It's the contrast between the madness of Christmas shopping at Brayhead compared with a serene walk on a deserted Scottish beach.

[24 : 59] I'd rather be in the paradise of God than hanging on a Roman cross. I'd rather be in the green fields of England than in the trenches of the Somme.

I'd rather be on a quiet beach than on a crowded Brayhead. But for however beautiful Eden was in the book of Genesis, the paradise Jesus promises is greater still because he says to this dying criminal, you shall be with me.

You shall be with me. You see, the presence of Jesus makes paradise what it is. You see, the next time this dying criminal saw Jesus, Jesus was no longer hanging naked on a Roman cross.

He saw a glorified Jesus whose face shone like the sun in all its brilliance and before whom all the holy angels bowed in praise and worship.

The next time he hears Jesus, he will not hear the sound of mocking voices, he will hear the adoring songs of the choirs of paradise. We ask the question, what's this criminal done to deserve such a promise?

[26 : 24] What has he done to deserve such a promise? Nothing. Nothing. All he did was cry out, Jesus, remember me. Here is the power of the cross of Jesus that through faith this criminal who had lived an entirely filthy life was promised paradise.

He first met Jesus in the worst possible place, but then he met Jesus in the best possible place. He first met with Jesus on the cross, but then he met with Jesus in paradise.

Here we have the power of the cross that through his determination to save others and not himself. Jesus has opened the way for those of us whose lives, and we're all like this, are full of wrong turns. He's opened the way for us to paradise. Just think for one second. Please think for one second. Paradise awaits every Christian.

A paradise of peace, joy, love, harmony, beauty, and glory, because Jesus will be with us.

[27 : 47] Think of it. We deserved perdition, not paradise, but because of what Jesus did for us on the cross that day. We shall be with him in a place we cannot now imagine the beauty of.

When times are tough for you in life, think of what lies ahead of you, and that even though the worst should happen to us in this life, the best awaits us in the next.

This is the power of the cross of Jesus, and our access there is assured by the promise of Christ through faith in him. Today might be the worst of times for you.

You might be going through a really difficult time in your life right now. But if you shall commit yourself to Jesus by faith in him, it shall become the best of times for you. If you were to ask that criminal whether it was worth being on the cross, he would say to you, in Aramaic of course,

because he couldn't speak English, he'd have said, I'd rather not have endured its pain, but because Jesus was beside me, it was all worth it.

will you not call out today, Jesus, remember me? Let us pray.

[29 : 11] our loving heavenly father, we thank you for the message of the gospel. We thank you for the amazingness of your mercy.

We have nothing to offer you except a life of wasted opportunities and wrong turns, and yet by your mercy and your grace, through faith in Jesus, you say, today, you shall be with me in paradise.
Amen.