

WHY DO WE NEED THE STORY OF THREE CROSSES RATHER THAN JUST ONE?

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Luke 23:32-43 - "Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. [33] 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. [34] And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. [35] 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!" [36] The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine [37] and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" [38] There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." [39] One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" [40] But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? [41] And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." [42] And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." [43] And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Death by crucifixion isn't necessarily more physically painful than other ways of dying. I don't know how one would even compare degrees of pain and suffering leading up to death. But there is something specifically agonizing about the kind of Roman execution described in our text that is relevant to this Good Friday teaching. On a cross, life slips **gradually away** while the **crowd watches**. The victim drifts in and out of consciousness **in front of** and frequently **with** other people. The victim didn't just **die**. He or she **knew** death was coming. There was time for slow pain and reflection.

One of the most bitter features of Jesus' death on the cross isn't often discussed. **The people who gathered around the cross were cruel to Jesus while He suffered**. It's one thing to suffer **pain**. It's another to **be mocked** while you suffer pain. We usually would choose to suffer pain - even sickness - **away** from other people.

We study the lives of people who suffered and died and were considered heroes for their dying. That wasn't the case with Jesus. **Nobody was with Him in His death**. No one was sympathetic. No one supported Him or took His side. Whatever friends there might have been, for the most part, deserted Him.

True, He was offering guilty sinners the greatest gift of all, but the prophet Isaiah said, "**He was despised and rejected**." Underline that word, "**despised**." I don't know if there is anything more base, or more depraved, than to watch someone die - to **know** he is leaving this world - and yet to feel nothing but mean and cruel thoughts toward that person as you watch Him die, and even worse, **to let Him know you despise Him while you watch Him die**.

But the gospel records are very clear. Jesus wasn't **praised** in His death. He wasn't **admired** in His death. He wasn't even **understood** in His death. The Bible says He was **mocked** and **despised** in His death:

Mark 15:27-32 - "And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left. [28] [29] And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, [30] save yourself, and come down from the cross!" [31] So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. [32] Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe." **Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.**"

That's what the Bible says. There was Jesus, suffering and dying. And everybody was slinging insults at Him, **including the two bandits He was crucified between** - "...Those who were crucified with him also reviled him"(Mark 15:32).

Matthew and Mark are consistent in their witness that **both criminals were mocking Jesus at the beginning**. One changes his mind as he watches Jesus closely on the cross. We'll talk more about that in just a minute. But as Jesus is about to die, and as God's plan reaches its climax, everything begins to sharpen in focus and intensity. There's more on my mind than mere **sympathy** for Jesus - "Poor Jesus, He suffered so much." No. There something much more important

than pity here. I share these thoughts:

1) **THE DARKNESS AND WILLFULNESS OF HUMAN UNBELIEF IS EXPOSED**

What Luke hints at, Mark says directly. The mockers told Jesus to come down off the cross and save Himself **so that they could see and then believe who He really was:**

Mark 15:32 - "Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross **that we may see and believe.**"

These people had seen Jesus raise the dead, heal the leper with a touch, and open the eyes of the blind. And **they hadn't believed Jesus yet.** So what kind of game were they playing? There was no lack of evidence for the truth of Jesus' claims about Himself. The proof was there for the world to see.

But the world didn't **want** to see. The problem wasn't a lack of evidence. The problem was darkness of heart. The problem was a rejection of clear truth. The problem was a cherishing of sin and love for darkness rather than light. That's important because we need to know what the **reasons** for unbelief are, and we need to know that this hasn't changed to this day.

The Jewish people hated Jesus and trumped up charges to have Him executed because He told them that their religion and their traditions were empty without the promised Messiah/Redeemer. And then, as now, you can tell people almost anything more easily than you can tell them their religion is useless without faith in Jesus Christ, God the Son. More than anything, **religious people hate being told that their religion isn't good enough.** Or that Jesus holds **exclusive title** as Redeemer and coming Judge.

The Gentiles hated Jesus because the gospel proves man can never reach God with his own wisdom or efforts. That's a hard message for anyone to swallow. It takes humility and repentance to **digest** the message of the cross. You have to admit something terrible about yourself before you'll embrace the truth of the cross.

No one rejects Jesus because He said, "**Love one another as I have loved you.**" Then and now, people reject Jesus because He said, "**Except you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.**"

Now we come to the account of the criminals and their words to Jesus on the cross. Luke is the only witness to record the famous conversation. We should be eternally grateful for his careful diligence in preserving sentences that were spoken in only a few seconds, but have eternal lessons bound up in them.

Luke 23:39-43 - "One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? **Save yourself and us!**" [40] But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? [41] And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but **this man has done nothing wrong.**" [42] And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." [43] And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

2) **THOSE WHO REJECT JESUS WILL FIND NO OTHER OFFER OF GOD'S GRACE. THEIR WISH TO BE JUDGED BY THEIR OWN SINFUL LIVES APART FROM DIVINE GRACE WILL FINALLY BE GRANTED**

Luke 23:39 - "One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

This man has no regard at all for who Jesus really is or what He is accomplishing on the cross. He is bound up in self and wants to save his own skin. He doesn't care a hoot about being right with God. And here's what we need to notice. **He gets no answer from Jesus. Total silence. No response.** Jesus has grace for the guilty, but there would be no deliverance for the unbelieving. Only judgement awaits those who reject God's Son, the

Chosen Redeemer of mankind.

We all need this reminder from this unrepentant criminal. Luke must have been stunned as he noticed it. It's recorded for our learning. We all have this natural tendency to imagine the love of God just sweeps *everyone* up into heaven - "**Love Wins**" - but that isn't the case. There comes to an unbelieving heart a blindness that defies all logic. Think about it. This man is about to die. Nothing but judgement awaits him for his wicked life. ***The Redeemer who can save his soul is yards away, and all he can do is mock Him and despise Him.***

Be careful what you **do** with what you **know** about Jesus. The Bible puts the haunting question in short little words all can understand and none can avoid: "**How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?**(Hebrews 2:2)

3) **ONE CRIMINAL HAD A RADICAL CHANGE OF HEART ABOUT JESUS**

Only Luke records this dramatic turning point in the conversation on the cross:

Luke 23:39-42 - "One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" [40] But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? [41] And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but *this man has done nothing wrong.*" [42] And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

We'll never know for certain what it was that triggered such repentance in this bandit's heart. Just on the face of the text, it appears that something in the first criminal's stubborn scorn and unbelief awakened the second criminal's conscience. He changes his tune immediately in reaction to the first criminal's taunts.

Sometimes that happens. ***Sometimes sin looks uglier when we see it in someone else.*** Maybe he saw his own heart in a mirror. All we know for sure is something turned his eyes away from himself and pointed his gaze toward God and judgement. He said to the first criminal, "**Don't you fear God?**"(40).

"Don't you fear God?"What a wise question. **"How can you not think about God right now? Where's your head?"**There come times, critical moments in life, when you **must think about God**. No one can afford to ignore God forever. There's an urgency to what you do with God. Of course, what you and I do with God is **always** the most urgent thing about us. But there are times when life especially **presses** this urgency on us.

There are two factors that these criminals must come to terms with. They are **guilty** sinners. And they are **dying** sinners. And criminal number two finally realizes that only a fool ignores God facing those two realities. Suddenly you're at the plate of life and it's a full count - **3 and 2**. **The next pitch matters.** The next call **effects things** - changes them one way or the other.

There are people listening to me right now who never think about God. You don't calculate eternity into your plans. You're all caught up in the present. You ignore the nagging voice of conscience that tells you every day you aren't right with God. That's what it **means to not fear God**. Or you believe there is a God, but He's eventually just going to ignore and overlook your unbelief and sin. That too is what to means to **not fear God**.

That's what criminal number two is saying to criminal number one. **"How can you face certain death and a very risky eternity without thinking about your own guilt and sin? Wake up, man! This Jesus offers forgiveness to sinners!"**

But how did criminal number one know that? What made him so sure Jesus would forgive guilty sinners. Luke the detective historian fills in that gap. This criminal **knew** Jesus offered forgiveness to sinners from the words

Jesus had just prayed - **“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”**(Luke 23:34). Being gracious to those who wrong us personally is still the strongest evangelistic tool under heaven. It’s also the method most of us *least* like to use.

So something in the character of Jesus, and something in the ugliness of sin, and something in the seriousness of the moment, all knit together to soften and enlighten this criminal’s heart.

God, in His grace, brings those moments to every life. All of us have flashpoints in our lives when we see the blackness of our own hearts. God brings merciful times when we actually, even if only briefly, *tire* of the sinful course of this world. And we all have moments when we can’t help having our minds, even briefly, pulled up above our daily routines. We confront our *mortality*. We long for meaning. We crave permanence. ***We are desperate for pardon and peace with God.*** We start to *fear God*.

It’s at this point that our text offers such blessed words of promise and hope.

4) THE ELEMENTS OF REPENTANCE AND THE GATEWAY TO ETERNAL LIFE

Luke 23:40-43 - **“But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? [41] And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” [42] And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” [43] And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”**

True, it all happens very quickly. And fair enough, this running-out-of-breath exchange begs some questions. But here’s what we can see for sure:

- a) ***There was an honest acknowledgment of personal guilt and sin.*** **“We’re just getting what we deserve”**(41), the repentant criminal said to the other.

Now, you may not be a *criminal*, but you are a *sinner*. And nobody ever gets anywhere with God until that is faced squarely and admitted.

“All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” This issue of personal sin has to become ***the central issue*** needing attention. This criminal had the advantage of knowing his life was coming to an end. That may not be pleasant, ***but it does, at least, have one advantage. It makes it easier to focus on the central issues of life without the distractions of the business of living.***

It’s usually the moment-by-moment, one-after-the-other, ordinary concerns of daily life - the doing of homework, meeting with friends, calling the baby sitter, faxing that quote, ironing those shirts - ***those*** things distract us from seeing what genuine life and God and the cross and eternity are all about. Nothing makes it harder to deeply consider God than the ordinariness of our daily routines. The nearness of death has a distinct way of sharpening our sight to these things.

- b) ***He saw Jesus Christ as the one who could give Him eternal life.*** I don’t even know ***how*** he reached all those conclusions about Jesus. The text says ***he knew Jesus was righteous and pure.*** **“This man has done nothing wrong”**(Luke 23:41). So at the very least he saw ***purity*** in Jesus that went beyond anything merely human. He saw the ***love and grace*** of Jesus as He forgave those who put Him to death.

Whatever it was, he saw Jesus as the only one who could save his soul. ***He cried out to Jesus.*** That’s what every person must do who would be right with God. Jesus said so - **“No man comes to the Father but by Me.”**

- c) ***He publicly took his stand with Jesus.*** I started out this message noting that everyone around the cross was mocking Jesus. This criminal, who once joined in with the mockers, now ***openly sides*** with Jesus.

This is wonderful and powerful. It ***marks*** the presence of something inwardly genuine in this repentant thug. He ***refuses to let the barbs of the other criminal go unchallenged.*** He ***stands up*** for Jesus. He ***plants the flag.*** His faith isn't just all in his head. He can't do ***much*** for Jesus any more, but what he ***can*** do he ***will.*** This criminal makes me feel ashamed whenever I allow the coolness of the spiritual tone of this age dampen my own zeal for my Lord. I hope it does the same to you.

- d) ***He knows there's another kingdom coming.*** All the other thief could do was think of his own skin. ***"Save yourself and us"***(Luke 23:39). But this criminal knows that Jesus is a king. And he knows that kings have kingdoms. ***"Jesus, remember me when you come in (or into) your kingdom"***(23:42).

It takes no great grace to live for the moment. All of us naturally live for ourselves and for the present. The Bible teaches that no one will live this life properly ***until he sees it as preparatory for another.*** Eternity and judgement are coming. Live life ***here*** like you're ***going somewhere else.***

- e) ***He won't allow his messed up past to keep him from receiving grace and forgiveness.*** How easy it would have been for him to feel that his life was over. He hadn't performed very well. And consider this. He had no chance to ***make good*** in his earthly future. I've seen many people judge themselves ***disqualified*** for anything good from God.

It is amazing that this thief somehow won't write himself off. There is such a wonderful simplicity in the way he says, ***"Jesus, I can't do anything about my life now. I certainly have nothing to offer in terms of missionary service or tithes or worship leading. I don't have any time. Just remember me when you come into your kingdom! You don't have a reason in the world to care about me. But please do!"***

And by the way, he is the ***only*** person in the whole New Testament to call Jesus by what we would call, His first name - ***"Jesus, remember me...."*** Except for a few angels, no one else calls Jesus that in the whole New Testament.

Here's the lesson. ***Bring your messed up life to Jesus.*** The first thief warns me not to let my ***unbelief and hard heart shut out God's grace.*** The second thief reminds me that ***my own guilt must never keep me from simply trusting Jesus for cleansing and eternal life.***

Thank God for these two crosses. We always need both of those reminders

5) **THERE IS NEVER ANY HESITANCY ON THE PART OF JESUS TO CLEANSE SINNERS AND TAKE THEM TO PARADISE**

Luke 23:43 - ***"And he [Jesus] said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."***

I'm sure glad Jesus didn't say, ***"Listen, you don't understand, you're a criminal!"*** Or, ***"If only you had come sooner. You've let things go too far."*** There's not the slightest word of correction. Not the slightest ***pause*** or moment of ***hesitation.*** It's all so instant and glorious and simple. ***"Fine. Today you'll be with me in paradise."***

Truly, the most glorious sentence spoken in the whole world.