

INTRODUCTION

This is the second of three messages on Jesus' crucifixion. Have you ever wondered why Dr. Luke and the other gospel writers don't go into the details of crucifixion? Dr. Luke only used four words in verse 33. He wrote, "There they crucified him." The answer is simple. Nearly everyone in the first century had witnessed crucifixions. Back in the days of Jesus, executions were staged for the public to see, with the belief that witnessing a horrible death would serve as a deterrent for crime.

So, for his original audience, Dr. Luke didn't need to describe the crucifixion—they all knew the horror of it. None of us have ever seen a real crucifixion, and probably most people in this room have never watched a person die from any cause. All of the movies, plays, and paintings of the crucifixion of Jesus are sanitized versions of what really took place. We cannot imagine the obscene horror of Roman crucifixion. It was such a grisly way to die that those being crucified welcomed death like a warm blanket on a cold night.

If I told you I came up on a wreck yesterday on I-20 where an 18-wheeler crossed the median and hit a pickup truck head-on, I wouldn't have to go into the details—you've seen enough wrecks to imagine the carnage. But if I went back in time 2,000 years and told Dr. Luke the same thing, he would scratch his head—he wouldn't have a frame of reference for an automobile wreck. The same is true for us and the cross. Today, people wear crosses around their necks—while during Jesus' day it was an instrument of horrible torture.

I think it's important for us to have a clear understand of just how much Jesus suffered for us. Let me read another quotation from the 1986 article on the crucifixion of Jesus that appeared in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*:

The procedure of crucifixion may be summarized as follows. The cross was put on the ground and the victim laid upon it. Nails, about 7 inches long and with a diameter of 1 cm were driven in the wrists. The points would go into the vicinity of the median nerve, causing shocks of pain to radiate through the arms. It was possible to place the nails between the bones so that no fractures occurred. Studies have shown that nails were probably driven through the small bones of the wrist, since nails in the palms of the hand would not support the weight of a body. In ancient terminology, the wrist was considered to be part of the hand. The feet were then nailed to the stipes. To allow for this, the knees had to be bent and rotated laterally, being left in a very uncomfortable position.

When the cross was erected upright, there was tremendous strain put on the wrists, arms and shoulders, resulting in a dislocation of the shoulder and elbow joints. The arms, being held up and outward, held the rib cage in a position which made it extremely difficult to exhale, and impossible to take a full breath. The victim would only be able to take very shallow breaths. (This may explain why Jesus made very short statements while on the cross). As time passed, the muscles, from the loss of blood, lack of oxygen and the fixed position of the body, would undergo severe cramps and spasmodic contractions. (Edwards, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 255, No. 11)

Remember, there were three crosses that day, and three men crucified. These three crosses each stood at the beginning of a road to somewhere—so today I'm going to be talking about three cross-roads. Let's begin reading in Luke 23:33:

When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. (Skip down to verse 39) One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence?" We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

The Jewish leaders intentionally crucified two criminals with Jesus because they wanted people to consider Him guilty by association. But it was God's plan all along. 700 years earlier Isaiah had prophesied the Messiah would be "numbered with the transgressors." (Isaiah 53:12) The Jews put Jesus between two known criminals for humiliation but God used for illustration to teach us some wonderful lessons about salvation. We can learn a lesson from each cross. The first is:

1. THE CROSS OF REJECTION: THE ROAD TO HELL

We don't know the names of these two criminals, so in order to distinguish them, without saying, "thief #1 and thief #2" I'll call the first thief Eli, a common Jewish name. The word Luke used for both these men means bandit or robber. Mark uses a word that could mean "murderer." These weren't good guys who slipped into crime as first offenders. They were hardened criminals—guilty of multiple acts of violence.

As Eli hung there, he fell into the chant of the crowd. He heard them calling out, "IF you are the Son of God save yourself." So he parroted what he heard the others say. He cried, "IF you are the Christ, save yourself and us!" He didn't believe Jesus really was the Messiah—he just wanted to be rescued.

You may wonder how a man could die within a few feet of the Son of God and still reject Him. The sad truth is many people don't call out to God for mercy in the moment they die. Eli's behavior isn't the exception, it's the rule. Jesus said, "Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction and MANY enter through it." (Matthew 7:13) When you stand at the cross of rejection, it is a road that leads straight to hell.

Some people have chosen to stand with Eli at the cross of rejection and they refuse to trust Jesus for forgiveness. On June 11, 2001, Timothy McVeigh was executed by lethal injection for the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in which 168 people died. His last words were from the poem "Invictus" written by William Ernest Henley which say, "I thank whatever gods that may be; for my unconquerable soul;...My head is bloody but not bowed;...It matters not how strait the gate;...How charged with punishments the scroll; I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul."

Eli was willing to believe in Jesus, *only* if Jesus would get him out of his mess. There are many people today who have that kind of attitude. They say, "If God will fix my problem, I'll trust Him." Or sometimes they phrase it as a question, "If God is so loving, and so good why did He let my child die, or my husband die, or why did He let me lose my job?"

When you make your faith conditional on God performing for you, it's no faith at all. John Piper calls it car-jack theology. He writes: "This thief's attitude reflects the old car-jack theology. A car-jack is a dirty, useless thing to be kept out of sight in the trunk until you have a flat tire (a little suffering). Then you get it out, let it do the dirty work and put it away again. The thief said, 'If you're such a good jack, get me down off this cross, Jesus.' Today we say, 'If you're such a good jack, pull me up out of this sickness, out of this financial mess, out of this lousy job, or out of this crummy marriage.'"

Eli rejected Jesus as the sinless Son of God, and his personal rejection landed him on a road of eternal separation from God in a place the Bible calls hell. But thank God for the lesson we learn from the other criminal. In him we discover:

2. THE CROSS OF REPENTANCE: THE ROAD OF FAITH

Let's call this criminal Jason. Jason rebuked Eli and then he made a wonderful profession of faith. His statements give us a pattern for a prayer of faith. If you can sincerely pray this prayer, Jesus can save you too. There were three parts to his prayer:

(1) "I am guilty."

As he hung there writhing in agony, Jason shouted to Eli, "Don't you fear God? We are getting what we deserve for our crimes." When it comes to sin, most of us are in denial. We have tried to do everything we can to make sin sound acceptable. I heard a funny story about a man who was studying his family tree to make a report at his upcoming family reunion. In his research he discovered to his horror that one of his great uncles had been arrested for murder, and had died in the electric chair. He was embarrassed to mention that in his report to the family so he dressed it up by making the following genealogy note: "Uncle Harry occupied a chair of applied electricity at one of our important government institutions. He was attached to his position by the strongest of ties and his death came as a real shock."

But Jason didn't try to cover up his problem. He admitted he was guilty and he deserved the punishment he was receiving. Before you can be saved, you must admit you are guilty, too. Next, Jason prayed:

(2) "Jesus, You are holy."

He didn't say those exact words, but that was the attitude of his heart. He told Eli, "This man has done nothing wrong." He acknowledged Jesus was the sinless Son of God. Both Matthew and Mark write at the beginning *both* criminals hurled insults at Jesus. What was it that caused Jason to change his opinion and to change his taunts into a prayer of saving faith? I believe as he

watched the suffering of Jesus, Jason became convinced Jesus really was the Son of God. As Jesus hung there, the people mocked Him and ridiculed Him. They shouted insults at Him, and probably threw rocks at Him. But Jesus refused to respond in hatred or anger toward the soldiers or those who mocked Him. Instead, the thief heard Jesus say, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." When Jason saw that kind of unselfish love coming from a man who was dying in agony, he had to admit there was something different about Jesus. The word "repent" literally means to change your mind. Jason changed his mind about Jesus and about himself. Max Lucado describes the scene: "He hears the jests and the insults and sees the man remain quiet. He see the fresh blood on Jesus' cheeks, the crown of thorns scraping Jesus' scalp and he hears the horse whisper, 'Father, forgive them.' Slowly the thief's curiosity offsets the pain in his body. He momentarily forgets the nails rubbing against the raw bones of his wrists and the cramps in his calves. He begins to feel a peculiar warmth in his heart: he begins to care about this peaceful martyr. There is no anger in Jesus' eyes, only tears." (Max Lucado, *Six Hours One Friday*)

Jesus died in such a way that even the hardened Roman centurion supervising the crucifixion was forced to admit, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" By the way, do you know when people are going to see Jesus in you? When you are insulted, you don't retaliate. When people cut you to shreds verbally, you don't react with anger and hatred—you show them love and forgiveness—that's what will catch their attention.

(3) "I trust You with my future"

Jason then turned to Jesus and prayed, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." While both of them were just hours from death, Jason realized death isn't the end—there is something after death. And in that future time, he believed Jesus would be a King and have a kingdom. What faith!

There was sign over Jesus' head announcing He was a king, but nobody ever looked less like a king than Jesus on the cross. By this time, His face was bloated and swollen from the beating He had received. His beard had been plucked from His face, and what hair remained was matted with the blood, sweat, and tears from the past twelve hours of torture.

We really can't imagine how hideous Jesus looked on the cross. Isaiah tells us that, "His appearance was disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness." (Isaiah 52:14) Yet when Jason looked into His eyes, he said, "I'm trusting you with my future." It was humble prayer. He didn't say, "Give me a place at your right hand, or let me be your #1 assistant." Not, "I want a mansion, or a cabin on a hill" just "remember me."

The little chorus we sing, "Do Lord, Oh do Lord, oh do remember me" comes from this request. Jason started down a road of faith just moments before he died, but it was a road that led him to Jesus. This is what is sometimes called deathbed repentance. Can Jesus save a rotten sinner just moments before they die? Absolutely! Alexander McClaren has written, "There is one example of deathbed repentance in the Bible so that none may despair; but only one so that none may presume." My friend, you are a fool indeed if you are waiting until the last moments of your life to trust Christ—because you never know when your last moment will come.

The third cross in the center is:

3. THE CROSS OF RECONCILIATION: THE ROAD TO PARADISE

On the center cross was Jesus, suspended between heaven and earth. He is the only God-Man who ever lived. Because He was fully human, He could reach down and take the hand of that thief and any other willing sinner. Because He is fully God, He could reach up into heaven and take the Hand of God. Then, through His death, He brought sinful mankind and a holy God together so we could be reconciled with God.

The word "reconcile" means "to agree." In your monthly bank statement, the balance in your check book should be "reconciled" or agree with the same amount the bank says you have. That's what Jesus did when He reconciled us with God—He brought us to a place and time so we can *agree* with God. The Bible says, "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your mind because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation." (Colossians 1:20-21)

I once read a moving account about a divorced couple who had only one child, and she developed a fatal illness. Both parents loved their daughter, but they had become bitter enemies toward each other and would hardly speak. As the daughter lay dying, her father stood on one side of her bed, with her mother standing on the other side. Her father said, "Sweetheart, is there anything we can do for you?" Before she died, the little girl took her parent's hands in each of hers and joined them together and said, "I want you and mommy to be together again." That's a beautiful picture of what Jesus did for us. Jesus, is it possible for sinners like us, to be reconciled with a Holy God? He would say, "Over my dead body." We were enemies of God in our own minds, and Jesus died to reconnect us to His Father.

When Jason prayed His prayer of faith, Jesus responded with a three-fold promise. He said, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." Let's break that promise down into its three components so we can better understand what Jesus meant—because we can claim the same promise.

(1) TODAY: The best time

Jesus didn't say, "tomorrow" or "in three days" or "in forty days when I ascend" or "next year" or "in a thousand years." He didn't say, "after you've been baptized" or "after you've gone through catechism" or "after you've spent a few years in purgatory." No, He told Jason, "TODAY, you'll be with me."

The great part of this promise for us is the *moment* a Christian dies they can be with the Lord in paradise. The Bible doesn't teach the doctrine of limbo, or purgatory, or soul sleep. We are told when a Christian dies they are "absent from the Body and present with the Lord." (II Corinthians 5:8) If you've trusted Jesus, then the moment you die, you can claim that part of His promise, "Today, you'll be with me in paradise."

(2) WITH ME: The best company

Have you ever been somewhere for the first time, and you feel uncomfortable because you are "out of your element?" You don't know the people and you're unfamiliar with the surroundings? That can be tough. It's so much better if there is someone along who knows the place and knows the people and can escort you around—especially if they are in charge. That's what Jesus was saying. He said, "Jason, I'm going somewhere today, and you've never been there before, but I have. Don't worry, you're going with me."

Home is home sweet home not because of *what* is there, but *who* is there. When I come home from a trip, I don't kiss the television or the hug the drapes and say, "Oh I missed you so much." No, I give Cindy a big hug and kiss. Home is anywhere I'm with her. The same is true of heaven. The thing that will make heaven heavenly is Jesus will be there. I don't care about the streets of gold or the gates of pearl or the crystal sea—I just want to see Jesus. I don't care where heaven is, as long as I'm with Jesus! That's the best company.

(3) IN PARADISE: The best place

Jesus told Jason within that very day, they would be in paradise. That word "paradise" isn't translated, that's the actual word in Greek—*paradiso*. It literally means an enclosed garden. It is a deliberate reference to the Garden of Eden. In salvation, Jesus restores what man lost when sin entered the world. Adam and Eve lived in a perfect garden and had unlimited fellowship with God. Jesus promises we will go to a place that is paradise restored.

Where is this paradise? Anytime you want to know what a Bible word means, the first thing you need to do is find where that word appears elsewhere in the Bible. There are two more places the word "paradise" appears in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul wrote, "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. (There's not a seventh heaven. In the Bible, "heaven" refers to three areas. The first heaven is the atmosphere around the planet. The second is the stellar sky, and the third heaven is where God dwells. This man was probably Paul, but in order to keep from boasting, he refers to himself in the third person) Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man...was caught up to paradise." (II Corinthians 12:2-3) Then in the Book of Revelation Jesus makes a great promise to the members of the church at Ephesus: "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the Tree of Life, which is in the paradise of God." (Revelation 2:7) So this "Paradise of God" is where the tree of life is. John describes it more fully in Revelation 22:2-4, "On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing its fruit every month. And the leaves are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any more curse. The throne of God will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads."

You may wonder how a tree can grow on both sides of a river—there are many trees. If I say, "the pine tree is indigenous to East Texas," I'm not talking about a single tree, but all pine trees here. Jesus promised heaven will be so wonderful it will be paradise!

CONCLUSION

Three hours later Jesus was dead. The soldiers come and crush the kneecaps of the two thieves. Since they can no longer push up to breath, they soon suffocate. One thief finds his road led him to hell, but in the next instance, the other thief found his road of faith led him to Jesus. One thief died "in sin" and was lost forever. But the other thief put his faith in Jesus, so he died "to sin." Everyone in this room will either die in your sin, or you will die to sin. But Jesus has made a way for our forgiveness because He died for sin.

These three crosses also reflect the truth of Romans 6:23 which says, "The wages of sin is death" that's what happened to the thief who rejected Jesus. "But the gift of God is eternal life" that's what the repenting thief found—God's free gift of eternal life. But it is made possible "through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

Where are you today? Are you standing with the cross of rejection? You would believe if you saw some kind of miracle? Or will you stand at the cross of repentance, and turn from your sins and trust Jesus with your future? These two men were the same distance from Jesus, and one followed his unbelief on the road to hell, and the other walked a road of faith and ended up in paradise. It's like two raindrops falling side by side on the Continental Divide in the Rockies, one drop slides toward the Pacific Ocean while the other drop falls to the East and ends up in the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic. Two people can be sitting together in church and follow different roads toward eternity.

I've always been fascinated with the ending of the 1959 version of the movie "Ben Hur." Director William Wyler shows Jesus writhing in agony in a driving rain storm. Suddenly a drop of His blood splatters into the water at the foot of the cross, then another and another until the water is stained with Jesus' blood. The pool of water flows down and overflows into another, which in turn flows into a river where it flows toward the oceans symbolically spreading throughout the earth. What a message! His blood is available to cleanse you of your sin.

William Cowper wrote the words to a beautiful hymn that says, "There is a fountain filled with blood; drawn from Emmanuel's veins; and sinners plunged beneath that flood; lose all their guilty stains;" One verse says, "The dying thief rejoiced to see; that fountain in his day; and there may I; though vile as He; wash all my sins away."

OUTLINE

1. THE CROSS OF REJECTION: THE ROAD TO HELL

2. THE CROSS OF REPENTANCE: THE ROAD OF FAITH

A prayer of faith:

- (1.) "I am guilty."
- (2.) "You are holy."
- (3.) "I trust You with my future"

3. THE CROSS OF RECONCILIATION: THE ROAD TO PARADISE

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your mind because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation. *Colossians 1:20-21*

Jesus' Promise:

- (1.) TODAY: The best time
- (2.) WITH ME: The best company
- (3.) IN PARADISE: The best place



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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes