

The Two Thieves

Last 24 Hours of Christ

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This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the gospel of Luke 23. As you turn to Luke 23, I want to welcome those of you that are guests and visitors with us, or maybe by chance those of you who haven't had the opportunity to be with us in some time, on a very strategic journey through scripture. We find ourselves in Luke 23 today, however, we're not making a journey through one respective gospel and/or the entirety or the totality of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, in fact, in this season of our church's life, we're focusing on what the gospels spend the most great amount of focus upon. You take the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and you begin to quantify it to his ministry per verses and chapters and such, you'll discover that the overwhelming majority of time in the four gospels is actually spent on the last 24 hours of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. In fact, when we come to this time period, we discover that typically all of the gospels, at least the majority of them, address each and every situation, conversation and scenario.

Today, as we come to Luke 23, we continue allowing the clock to "tick down." We know that by this point Jesus Christ is upon the cross. In just a moment, we're going to meet two men, one who will revile him and one who will repent before him. As we make our way to a mount called Mount Calvary or Golgotha, let me remind you that this is not just a story of 2,000 years ago, this is a story that impact us today and maybe more importantly is prophetic for the days ahead. As we've been walking through these 24 hours, we've seen that these events, these characters, these stories not only speak to us today but they prophesy, they project to the events that are right around the corner.

Today as we turn to Luke 23, we're going to begin in verse 39. It's not a lengthy passage but a very famous event on the cross. It says,

39 And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. 40 But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. 42 And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. 43 And

Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.

It's a famous event in these last 24 hours and in a moment I'm going to allude to a passage in Matthew as well as the gospel of Mark, but there's not a whole lot of quantity but there's a whole lot happening in these very few verses. And as we've done in weeks past, I just want to walk through some very strategic questions to not only set the scene but hopefully allow us to see what is playing out before not only our eyes but those that were there that day.

Let's begin with the "when." When did this encounter with the thieves take place? We know that Jesus Christ approximately somewhere between 9 and 10 AM was affixed to the cross. We'll study next week that at approximately noon is when darkness fell over the earth for three hours. So if you want to put it in chronological terms, you're between 9 AM and 12 noon, but more importantly I think we need to put it in the framework of the statements that Jesus Christ makes from the cross. The very first statement he makes is, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they're doing." This is the second statement and he personalizes it, "Today you will be with me in paradise." The last statement before darkness comes over the land is he says, "Woman, behold your son, John, behold your mother." After three hours of darkness, there will be that loud exclamation, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Then very simply, "I thirst. It is finished. Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." The reason this is important to the "when" today is that this is in the early stages of the cross and, yes, Jesus was already in a very poor physical state, but the darkness has not ensued, the last waning hours of the cross is not yet there, in fact, we are in the early stages of what we know as the crucifixion experience.

So somewhere between 9 and 12. It is the "who" that might be fascinating to us. We know who the primary characters are. We know Jesus Christ, of course, is in the center, and the primary character. We have here in these verses in verse 39 through 41, we have a thief or a malefactor who reviles against Jesus and condemns him, and then we have one who repents and asks a very important request of him. But I want to address that famous "they." We addressed this last week. Remember when Jesus Christ was placed on the cross, it says there very subtly in Matthew 27, it says, "And they sat down and they watched him." The "they" there would have been the Jewish individuals who accused him of blasphemy desiring his death. It would have been the Romans who were being paid to ensure his death. There would have been John and the four women who were bemoaning his death. And thousands of others who had gathered there saying, "Who was this and why in such manner?"

One of the issues that we have is that we often take the stories of scripture, particularly this one in Luke 23, and we either elaborate them with movies and television shows, books, painting, artwork, etc., and oftentimes it is our visualization of the story that limits our perspective of the story. Allow me to illustrate. For the sake of time I'll allude to, feel free to turn if you so desire and/or write a note for later. In Matthew 27:44 and in Mark 15:32, we're given an insight, a perspective of the scene that Luke does not give us. There in Matthew 27:44 it speaks of the reviling, it says, "and the thieves," plural, "reviled

against him." In Mark 15:32, it spoke of those who chided on him with their teeth and it spoke of it in the plurality. Now we really have two options at this point. Now remember the chronology here. There's not a whole lot of timeframe between what takes place in this story and the darkness falling. Option number 1 is that everybody on Mount Calvary was against Jesus and whom we know as the repentant thief had a "come to Jesus meeting," no pun intended, and repented of his reviling there on Mount Calvary. That's option 1. Option 2 is this, that all the paintings and all the movies gave very limited service to the scene on Mount Calvary. Understand that this was a time and this was a place where those who were contrary to those in power were displayed for all for all of their infractions. Do we really think that only three people were crucified that day? In fact, if you go to that hill called Mount Calvary, you'll see even on that place of the skull there is ample space for dozens of people to be placed upon a cross that fateful day.

Why is this important? I think it's important because I think oftentimes we see this scene as a debate, a debate between the repentant one and the reviling one with Jesus in the middle. But I think the scene is even more graphic than that because when he reviled him, he did not do it in isolation. He wasn't the only one saying, "Jesus, save us." There could have been dozens of them that were speaking ill of him. There could have been dozens of them that were saying contrary things to him. But we only have record of one who repents. That will be important in just a moment. It does not say "and they asked him to remember them in his kingdom." It says "they reviled, they chided," but we only have one who repents.

Then there's the "where." Now we know this is Mount Calvary. We know this is Golgotha, but allow me to allude back to last week. Remember we discussed kind of the intricacies, how one would experience a crucifixion, that if you were to take just the random thief who would be randomly crucified in the Roman day, the means of death would be asphyxiation, actually a lack of being able to catch one's breath. This is important because in the weeks ahead we're going to talk about the thieves on either side of Jesus, it said they broke their legs. Why? So that death would ensue quicker, because as one hung upon the cross, they were able to only breathe when they raised themselves up.

Now why is this so important to the story that they were the "where" part is on the cross? We discussed this. If you were hanging literally for your own life and every breath you took required every amount of energy you had and you would be very limited, the thing you would need to know is this, you did not know which breath would be your last. You did not know which breath or which statement would be your last. Think about it. We've all been in some type of physical exertion, I'll just use kind of a static example. We've been in the gym and at some point you were on some type of apparatus or weight lifting endeavor and you told whoever was with you, "I'm gonna do this 10 times," and you got to number 9 and said, "I can't do this a tenth time." Or maybe you said, "I'm gonna run a certain amount of miles," and before that goal that you set, you discovered your body couldn't do it. You see, every single person who hung on the cross thought that they had one more breath. They always thought they had the ability to say one more statement. But at some point the body gives out, at some point you're no longer able to speak. Why is

this so important? Because what these men say, all three of them that are recorded in Luke 23, is critical for us today because in all three cases it could have been the last thing they ever said.

So what was it that takes place? Well, beginning in verse 39, we have what I want to refer to as professions. The two thieves that we have record of and Jesus Christ himself, they make statements, they make declarations, they make professions. Allow me to read again, it says in verse 39, "If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." Let's walk through these professions for just a moment. Remember this could have and it is the last recorded statements that we have from the two thieves.

What's the last statement the reviling thief of record says? He basically says, "I shouldn't be here. Get me down." Isn't that the cry of humanity? "Not my fault." He basically declares, "This should not be what takes place. This is not how I wrote it. Get me off this." He continued to rationalize. He continued to justify. He continued to basically say, "This is not how I scripted it. If you really are who people say you are, get me down." Is that not how most people treat Jesus? He's the lucky rabbit foot of life? "Jesus, if you really are God, get me out of this mess. Jesus, if you really are who you say you are, then why does my bank account have a minus sign in front of it? Jesus, if you really are who you claim you are, why did it not work out the way that I thought it would?" Isn't it an interesting profession that everything is about him, everything is about it not working out the way he desired, everything is about, "Get me down."

Then there's the profession of the repentant thief. Notice that he has the longest statement of all, in fact, one of the great mysteries is did he say it all in one breath, was he going up, came back down, he came back again. But think what he says. The first thing he does is he addresses the thief that reviles Jesus and he basically says, "Have you lost your mind? We deserve this. The man who you criticized is innocent." Do you see the difference? One of them said, "I shouldn't be here." The other one says, "I deserve to be here."

So what does he say? "Remember me when you come into thy kingdom." Now this is a fascinating profession. Why? Because we don't know the backgrounds of these respective men but we do know this, we know they were in Jerusalem, we know that it's Passover week, we know they're hanging on the busiest street, at the busiest time of the year where more people would be gathered than anybody else. So no matter what their background was, whether they were experienced or exposed to biblical faith as described in the Old Testament, we don't know but we know this, that sometime in his life he'd either heard, witnessed, or heard from somebody that this Jesus of Nazareth was who he claimed to be. Why? Because he made this statement, "He's done nothing wrong."

Notice that nobody introduced themselves on the cross. Nobody had to explain who they were or why they were there, and he said, "Remember me when you come into your

kingdom." Now why is that an important statement? Do you remember the sign they had above Jesus? Three different languages, "This is the King of the Jews." From where he was hanging, he could see the temple. From where he was hanging, he could see the place where the sacrifices were made. From where he was hanging, I bet he could begin to see the smoke building from people preparing that famous Passover offering. And there while on Mount Calvary, he professes, "You're innocent, Jesus. I'm guilty. Don't take me off, just remember me." Wow.

Then Jesus' statement, "Today you will be with me in paradise." It's a very famous statement obviously but I don't think we understand the ramifications here because think about faiths of the world, think about religious expressions of the world. Every single religious expression can be summarized with the following statement: you either have to do something to attain what you want or you have to become something to attain what you want. Either you have to start doing something or stop doing something in order to become what you desire, or you have to reach some form of enlightenment, some stage, some level, whatever it may be. You say, "Why is that critical?" Do you realize when Jesus said, "Today," he was making this very clear profession that what that man said was enough. He didn't have to be baptized. He didn't have to take the Lord's Supper. He didn't have to tithe. He didn't have to attend church. He didn't have to volunteer in the preschool. He didn't have to do any of those things.

Why is that critical? Because Jesus Christ from his mouth said that what he stated was enough. The people in the front, the "they" that we talked about last week, those "Jewish guys," they were the ones who said, "Well, unless you do this, this, and this, you can't be good enough." Do you realize how that flew in the face of everything those men had been teaching and preaching? He said, "He doesn't have to go to the altar. He doesn't have to go and get this and get that and be here and be there. Today you'll be with me in paradise."

Where is the promise? The promise is simply this, that the future of that man who repented was much better than the present that he was living. That description "paradise," that place "paradise," there's a lot of allusions to it particularly in the Old Testament but it had just been a couple of years earlier where Jesus had gathered a group of people around and he told a story, it wasn't a fable, it wasn't a parable, it was a real-life account of a rich man and Lazarus. The rich man who was consumed with himself like the unrepentant thief, the Bible says he died in his sins and descended into hell. Lazarus who was a beggar, listen to the parallel, a beggar at the table of the rich man who just simply said, "I'll take whatever you give me," much like the repentant thief, says, "Hey, just remember me," the Bible says specifically he's in Abraham's bosom, he is in what you and I would call paradise. What a promise, the promise that Jesus Christ gives this guy is, "What you did to deserve where you are will not define where you end up for eternity." What a promise because if we got what we deserved for all of eternity, none of us, including this man, could lay claim to a place called paradise.

Then it's prophetic and obviously that speaks to these two men, it speaks to us today, but I want you to think of the two men not just as individuals, which they were, but think of

them as representing humanity. You've got one individual who is defending himself and contrary to the Lord, you've got another individual confessing his sin and saying, "Just remember me." Does that not picture humanity? In fact, the prophetic element of this passage is that it's not just these two guys that are trying to make a decision on who Jesus is in relationship to them, they represent all of humanity and much like the "who" we talked about, the overwhelming majority of humanity says, "Hey, this didn't work out well. Save me." In a very small group of people, in fact, in this story one person says, "I deserve everything I'm getting, just remember me." Remember what Jesus said in the famous Sermon on the Mount? He said the road to destruction is broad but the way of righteousness is narrow. You see, it's prophetic in the sense that the overwhelming majority of humanity will reject, will resist who Jesus Christ is and a very small percentage, in this story only one that we have record of, will say, "I deserve it. Jesus, remember me."

So let's talk about the "why." Why is this story so important for our lives? Let's begin with the profession. Understand that we've got a hill called Mount Calvary, most likely dozens of individuals losing their life. We have the accounts of Jesus in the middle, one thief who's unrepentant, one thief who does repent. And think about the professions of our world today. Just look at the percentages. It is a very small percentage of people who lay claim to Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. I spoke with a young person some weeks ago, a college student on another continent who said as far as they knew on their entire collegiate campus they said, "I'm the only believer in Jesus Christ." So let's come to this side of the proverbial pond. There are many of you today who remember the "glory years" of Christianity in America. You remember when a majority of people whether they wanted to or not got up on Sunday morning, put on their best clothes, and they "went to church."

So let's talk about not where we go but what we believe. We have a term in our culture that really has nothing to do with politics even though politics has hijacked it, it's called an evangelical Christian. An evangelical Christian is somebody who believes the Bible is true, Jesus was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, died a sacrificial death, rose from the grave in bodily form and is coming back again. Now I think most of us would agree that is elementary school Sunday school, correct? But do you realize in our culture in the United States of America, it doesn't matter if you look at the sacred sources or the secular sources, the number of people who actually believe those things is less than 10%. So when we talk about professions, if you claim to be a believer in Jesus Christ, you're not just outnumbered today, we were outnumbered on Mount Calvary too.

One of the most frightening statistics I've come across in recent days is what we call Generation Z. To give you a little perspective here, I'm what we call the X Generation, right under me are what we'd call the Millennials. Generation Z are those who basically they're in high school and/or below and there is debate on where you want to draw the line. Let's not get over-analytical but just think of somebody who is not yet of age to drive a car legally in this state, okay? Generation Z. According to the research, only 4% of them have a biblical worldview. Only 4%. See the world through the eyes of the repentant thief. That means that 96% of the young people in our culture today are the

reviling thief saying, "What about me? I didn't do anything wrong. If you really are who you claim to be, fix my mess."

So what's the promise for you and I today because I've got news, this one that was repentant, he was outnumbered on Mount Calvary, you and I as believers today, we are grossly outnumbered not in just the world but even in our own culture. He says, "Today you will be with me in paradise." I'm going to give you a statement. It's not original to me. I don't know who originated it. All of us have kind of "stolen it and plagiarized it" but, man, it is good. Here's the statement: if you're a believer in Jesus Christ, you have understood you've got a sin problem and asked Jesus that his death and his resurrection to be applied to your sin, that this world as you're living it, is all the hell you'll ever know, but if you're lost like this reviling thief, this world is all the heaven you'll ever know. Now think about that promise for just a moment because the last time I checked, both of these men – listen to me – both of them were in the same predicament. Neither one was actually doing better than the other. Neither one was actually doing worse. They were both on the same hill, both on a respective cross, and both had been accused guilty of their crimes, yet for one of them that was as good as it was ever going to be, and for the other that was as bad as it ever was going to be. Think about this, one man on a hill saying, "Jesus, remember me." Everybody else mocking him, making fun of him, harassing him, and yet what he experienced would be as bad as it ever would be. Believer, what we're walking through today, what we're navigating, it may not be fun, we may be outnumbered, it may not be looking good, but isn't it good to know that this is as bad as it ever will be?

Then there's the prophetic. This is where we kind of have to think in terms of the last couple of chapters of the book of the Bible. You know, the Bible speaks that there is coming a day, it's found specifically in Revelation 19, that there is coming a day where the clouds will part, that Jesus Christ will physically return and when he does, there's a very famous battle called the battle of Armageddon, the Bible speaks about blood to the bridle of the horse, all the enemies defeated by Jesus. The Bible speaks in chapter 20 of the book of Revelation that Jesus Christ establishes an earthly kingdom. By the time you get to the end of chapter 20, Satan has been loosed for a little season, there's a short stint of a rebellious event, and then beginning in verse 10 of Revelation 20, we have an event that we collectively call the Great White Throne Judgment of God and let me set the stage for you and then bring it back to our lives today. This is what the Bible present beginning in Revelation 20:10, it presents that all those that have rejected Jesus, all those thieves on Mount Calvary who mocked Jesus, who made fun of Jesus, all those people today who say, "I don't need Jesus," they are "in front" and according to the Bible they're judged according to their works. Then the Bible pictures those of us, that one thief on Mount Calvary, those of us who believe in Jesus Christ, that we're pictured behind him when this event takes place.

Now that's the scene but it's verse 10 that's important. In verse 10 we have a prophetic fulfillment not only of 2 Peter 3 but other passages, where it says heaven and earth fled away at his presence in a great ball of fire. In other words, everything that you're standing on literally today will be gone. Everything that we know in this world that we hold in

security will be vaporized in a moment and in a second. You say, "Why is that important for my life today?" I want you to think about these two thieves. As they stood on either side of Jesus, listen, they had nothing to stand upon except who they claimed Jesus was. That's all they had. They didn't have their possessions. They didn't have their titles. They didn't have their accolades. They were completely suspended and on no "firm footing." In Revelation 20 when Jesus Christ dissolves the creative order with a ball of fire, you've got nothing to stand on. Nobody has anything to stand on firmly except who they believe Jesus is and it determines whether you're in front of him being judged or you're behind him in a place of eternal security.

You see, these two men who speak on either side of Jesus aren't just two random thieves, they actually picture for us, they're prophetic for us of what's going to happen in each and every one of our lives one day. All those things that you claim to stand upon, you will not have them to stand upon when that day comes and so the question will be: will you be the unrepentant thief in this day who says, "I'm not guilty. You should have fixed this mess," or will you be the repentant thief that says, "You know what? I deserve this. Remember me." The choice is yours.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. This morning as we come to this time of decision, you know, maybe you're that individual seated here in this place, maybe you're watching online, maybe you're listening on the radio but you're that person today who the Spirit of God took the word of God and really pierced your heart. And maybe you're that person today saying, "You know what? I don't want to be that unrepentant thief. I don't want to be that person who's judged according to their works. I don't want to be that one who's condemned to the lake of fire." I've got great news for you: the Bible says whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Do you see the parallel with the repentant thief? Not somebody who joins a church, not somebody who does this or does that or stops this or starts that, whoever calls on the name of the Lord.

Maybe today you're that person saying, "You know what? I'm in the wrong place and in the wrong position. I need to be in the right one when it comes to Jesus." Let me encourage you just to call out, just to cry out, just to confess. You don't have to do so out loud, in fact, you don't have to use or say the same words that I might or might not say, but maybe your conversation, maybe your confession, maybe your prayer will go a little something like this. "God, today I realize that I'm in the wrong place. God, I realize that I have sinned and, God, I realize that I have done things I shouldn't have done, I've said things I shouldn't have said, I've thought things I shouldn't have thought and, God, I realize that according to the Bible it says the wages of my sin is death. But God, today I believe, I believe the second part of that verse that says but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. And so today, much like the repentant thief, God, I just want to confess that I've got a sin problem that only Jesus can fix. So God, today I believe, I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was born on my behalf. God, I believe he loved me so much, he lived a sinless life on my behalf. God, I believe that as we studied today when he hung upon that cross on Mount Calvary he was paying the price and the punishment for my sin. And God, today I believe, God, I believe that when he rose from the grave he made it possible, he made it feasible for my sins to be

forgiven and my soul to be saved. And God, today I don't have all the answer to all the issues and the struggles and the problems in this world but there is one thing I know, I've got a sin problem that only Jesus can solve. The best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me, I'm asking you to save me, I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads bowed and our eyes still closed, maybe you're that person today who needs to step out and step forward, maybe you're that person who needs to call on the name of Jesus. I want to tell you that we've got folks here that would love to hear your story, to pray with you, pray for you, we even have a special room set aside. Maybe today you're already a believer and maybe the Lord's impressed upon you the need for baptism or maybe you've already gone through some of those things and today the Lord has said this is your church home. Whatever it may be, we just want you to know that we're here to pray with you, pray for you, and just to hear your story. But maybe today you say, "Pastor, I've been a believer for years," maybe even for decades, and you say today is not a day for stepping out and stepping forward but maybe today is one of those days that when you exit this worship service you do so with a renewed heart, a renewed spirit and a new focus and perspective.

Lord Jesus, as we come to this time of decision, thank you that in your infinite mercy and grace you give us the opportunity to confess and to repent, you give us the opportunity to admit we've got a sin problem and claim you as Savior. God, thank you that on that hill called Mount Calvary though there were voices aplenty against you, you gave us the example of one who cried out to you. May we be that one today. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.