

# THE THREE CROSSES OF EASTER

Three Crosses stood upon Calvary 2,000 years ago. Those three crosses speak of two destinys, of three men and in what condition they died.

This morning you and I are just like one of those crosses. Because those three Crosses portray you and me. Those three crosses portray all that is important today, in all of life and for all of eternity. Which Cross do you identify with?

The middle Cross was Christ's. He **died with all sin on Him but no sin in Him**. What do I mean? He never sinned. He never disobeyed any of God's law. He was perfect, sinless, holy, divine, and unblemished in life and death. He was God. But He **BECAME** sin for us. He never sinned, but God hath "laid upon Him the iniquity of us all". Jesus bore the sin of the world as the Lamb of God. So we can never identify with His condition for we are never perfect nor ever God. Rather we can find ourselves as identifying with a thief on one side or the other of Jesus Christ this morning. What do I mean?

On each side of Christ's cross were the thief's crosses. One thief went to Paradise with Jesus, and the other went to the fires of Hell with Judas, most if not all the Sadducees and probably Pilate and Herod. What made the difference?

A simple equation helps us sort out their destinys.

The Thief who went to Paradise **died with sin in him but not on him**. What is that? He died a saved sinner. He died in peace, he died cleansed, forgiven, with a new heart, with no condemnation, with an endless life, he was a saved sinner. He was not perfect, he was not sinless, but he was eternally forgiven.

- ✓ Jesus took away his sin and put it upon Himself.
- ✓ Jesus took that thief as he was - guilty, and said "I completely take away all your just punishment".
- ✓ Jesus bore His Hell on the Cross that day.

So the Penitent Thief gasped his last words to Jesus, and watched His Savior peacefully and triumphantly die. The Repentant Thief died with

sin in him but not on him. He closed his eyes in overwhelming pain as he hung next to Jesus and opened them in inexpressible bliss that same day in the Presence of Jesus. That day he was with Jesus in Paradise.

The thief who dropped from the cross into Hell **died with all his sin on him and in him**. He died full of anger and bitterness in his soul.

- ✓ He was angry at Jesus whose life rebuked him,
- ✓ angry at the other thief whose transformation hardened him,
- ✓ angry at Rome whose laws had crucified him,
- ✓ angry at himself for the emptiness and restlessness he had made of of his life.

His sins weighed him down like lead, so he sank from this world in darkness, and plummeted into the blackness of the fires of Hell's waiting room. His screams of eternal torment began when his last tortured breath on Golgotha hissed through his swollen and battered lips. That day he was facing God's eternal wrath without the protective covering of Christ's sacrifice to shield his soul.

The greatest event the world has ever witnessed took place 1,970 years ago today. That event was when, at a skull shaped hill, on a sunny day outside of Jerusalem, with a cross of wood and with carpenter's tools - MANKIND MURDERED THEIR MAKER.

There on that hill called Calvary in full view of thousands of witnesses, was the day the Creator was crucified.

- His name was Jesus.
- He was a peasant carpenter.
- He had carried on an itinerant relief work across all of Israel.
- Thousands, tens of thousands followed, heard and witnessed the mightiest acts ever seen on the planet in history.
- They were fed.
- They were healed.
- Dead were raised.
- Deaf were made to hear and blind to see.
- Lepers were made new and demonized were delivered.

Now He hangs there seemingly helpless. Shouldn't Christ have done something on the cross if He were really God the Son? Yes, and He did. From the cross of wood where He was crucified with carpenter's tools, the Maker of Mankind performed a mighty miracle. He saved the thief who hung beside Him! Jesus was never too busy, Jesus was

never too tired, Jesus was never too sick or in pain to reach out and share the good news.

- Caught in prayer the evening before, He was arrested.
- Betrayed by a trusted friend with a kiss He was bound and dragged off to a mock trial with phoney witnesses.
- Beaten and mocked, spat upon and reviled He is rejected by His own and sent off to be crucified.

As we wait before our Risen Christ this resurrection morn, let us echo the scene of the first witness of the earth to the resurrection power of Jesus Christ...turn to Luke 23:39-43 (read). The scene is the cross, Friday of Passion Week. You remember how the week started at Martha, Mary and Lazarus' home (John 12) the crowd, the threats (Luke 19:28-48), the joyful eruption of King Jesus riding into Jerusalem as the sacrificial lambs were finding temporary homes. Then, parables and controversy (Luke 20-21) and the quiet evening of Luke 22:7-23 as Christ (mandere) commanded His memorial feast....Maundy Thursday.

1. Jesus washes the disciples' feet	13:1-20
2. Jesus and the disciples have the Last Supper	13:21-30
3. Jesus predicts Peter's denial	13:31-38
4. Jesus is the way to the Father	14:1-14
5. Jesus promises the Holy Spirit	14:15-31
6. Jesus teaches about the vine and the branches	15:1-17
7. Jesus warns about the world's hatred	15:18-16:4
8. Jesus teaches about the Holy Spirit	16:5-15
9. Jesus teaches about using his name in prayer	16:16-33
10. Jesus prays for himself	17:1-5
11. Jesus prays for his disciples	17:6-19
12. Jesus prays for future believers	17:20-26
13. Jesus agonizes in the garden	Lk 22:39-46
14. Jesus is betrayed and arrested	18:1-11
15. Annas questions Jesus	18:12-24
16. Caiaphas questions Jesus	Mk 14:53-65
17. Peter denies knowing Jesus	18:25-27
18. The council of religious leaders condemns Jesus	Mk 15:1
19. Judas kills himself	Mt. 27:3-10
20. Jesus stands trial before Pilate	18:28-37
21. Jesus stands trial before Herod	Lk 23:6-12
22. Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified	18:38-19:16
23. Roman soldiers mock Jesus	Mk 15:16-20
24. Jesus is led away to be crucified	19:17
25. Jesus is placed on the cross	19:18-27

GETHSEMENE: tears – bloody sweat and darkness, weak disciples, angry religious leaders, rough soldiers, torches, clubs – and the King of Kings led away.

MOCK TRIALS with Annas, then Caiaphas –  
 DENIALS by Peter in the courtyard.  
 SANDHEDRIN and condemnation –  
 REMORSE & SUICIDE for Judas.  
 THEN, PILATE: uncertainty, vacillation, weakness –  
 OFF TO HEROD – BACK TO PILATE.  
 ROMAN SCOURGING, SOLDIERS GAMES –  
 STAGGERING TO GOLGOTHA  
 A HOSTILE CROWD – some loving friends –  
 THOSE DULL THUDS of the mallet.  
 THE GASP of pain –  
 AND, THEN, THE CROSS.

NOW HANGING between earth and heaven for three hours, comes the exchange of deepest importance – CHRIST & A THIEF.

From the cross to paradise, a tale of love, forgiveness and a resurrection promise

Look with me now at our text, it is Luke 23:39-43

We have three crosses, two thieves  
 Matthew 27:44 tells us both robbers hurled insults. So both thieves joined with the crowd in mocking Jesus:

“He saved others, but he can’t save himself! He’s the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’ In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

“In the same way the robbers—plural.” The both joined in the sneering and taunting.

What happened in that scene to change that one thief’s heart-to give him the heroism to stand up for Jesus and the humility to submit to him? He hears at arm’s distance what Peter hears from afar and would write about years later. When the crowds hurled their insults at

Jesus, he did not retaliate; when Jesus hung there suffering, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted Himself to God the Father who judges justly.

YES – in that moment, as the Thief looked at the Jesus -- weak, broken, disfigured, a battered human from whose body flowed pain, cruel tortures, blood and drippings of enemy's spittle-- that thief tilts his head and strains to hear from Christ's swollen lips, purple and black from beatings. And then something flowed from Christ's hoarse and dry mouth, words that were pulsated from a heart of Divine Love. Listen again from Luke 23: 34

Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."

And in that moment a former accused, reviled – a condemned robber – a thief nearing death – hanging in the balances – on the way to hell – believes and repents. What do I mean by that? Look:

v.40 – He goes against the crowd, listening, cheering and hating Christ and rebukes the other thief

But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation?"

v. 41 – He admits to all his guilt and confesses his faith

"And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong."

v.42 – He calls on Jesus as his Savior.

Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

WHAT FAITH! A thief with no hope – a thief with no time left – a thief in excruciating pain looks to a fellow sufferer. AND WHAT DOES HE SEE? Ken Gire paints a word picture –

"In the midst of the spears of abuse thrust into Jesus' side, this thief hears him appeal to a court higher than Caesar's. The appeal is not for justice, but for mercy. And not mercy for himself, but for his accusers. The spears are sharp and relentless, but Jesus does not throw them back. He bears them in his heart. The one outlaw hears all this and lifts his faint head to look at the man from whose lips these tender words came. And when his eyes meet the Savior's, for a moment all time stands still. In those eyes he sees no hatred, no scorn, no

judgment. He sees only one thing—forgiveness. Then, he knows. He is face to face with a dying God. That a thief didn't know much theology. He only knew three things: that Jesus was a king, that his kingdom was not of this world, and that this king had the power to bring even the most unworthy into his kingdom. But that was enough. And, in a moment with the Savior, a lifetime of moral debt is cancelled. Incredible, when you think of it. Amidst the humiliating abuse of the crowd and the excruciating pain of the cross, Jesus was still about his Father's business. Even with his eyes sinking on the feverish horizon of death, he was telling a common thief about the uncommon riches of heaven."

AND WHAT WERE THOSE WORDS? Just three sum it up.

JESUS, REMEMBER ME –

Oh, the whole of God's revelation condensed by a man out of time, out of hope, out of places to turn – JESUS, REMEMBER ME.

Well, the only thing we need to establish is, who was he talking to?

JESUS, he said – that's the one who shall save His people from their sin (sounds like the right one according to Matthew 1:21)

JESUS, the meek and lowly one who can give rest to the soul.  
(Matthew 11:28-30)

JESUS who said – "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied" (Matt. 5:6).

JESUS who said – "If any man is thirsty, let Him come to Me and drink" (John 7:37).

JESUS who said – "But whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst" (John 4:14).

JESUS who said – "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful" (John 14:27).

JESUS who said – "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst" (John 6:35).

JESUS who said – "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

JESUS who said – "I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

YES, JESUS – REMEMBER.

JESUS REMEMBER – WHAT?

Remember my sins and iniquities no more –  
remember and hold my life of self and failure against me no more –  
remember my frailty – inability to save myself –  
remember my wasted life – and in short, JESUS REMEMBER ME.

What's the response of God the Son in the midst of the greatest labor of all time, bearing the crushing load of mankind's sin.

WHAT'S HIS RESPONSE? V.43 (read) – Jesus lets that nameless thief, that outlaw, malefactor condemned criminal, a common sinner just like me (and you, may I add!) Yes, Jesus lets him be the first one on earth experience His resurrection power TODAY IN PARADISE!

Luke 23:43 And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

That's resurrection hope – that's dying love – that's Jesus – have you said, JESUS, REMEMBER ME?

Stand with me, close your eyes and tell Jesus outloud quietly right now Thanks for remembering me!

#445 "Savior Dying Love"

Lets find that answer in the night Jesus met with a seeker of everlasting life. So, to conclude this Resurrection morning message lets go back to the start of Christ's ministry in John 3. Perhaps the best known of all the verses in the Bible is in this chapter.

Jesus started His ministry in John 3 by telling Nicodemus that God had narrowed the questions of eternal life down to three essentials. They are still essentials.<sup>1</sup>

RESPONSES: Jesus only offered two options. Either you can believe or disbelieve Him. He is right or wrong. If He is telling the truth, and I believe He is, then there is only one way to heaven - HIS. So, what will your response be? Belief or Unbelief?

DESTINIES: As far as Jesus goes its only Eternal Life or Eternal Death. There are no other comfortable choices. He draws the line and declares the alternatives and we are left to pick a destiny. Behind this door is:

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Chuck Swindoll, *Issues and Answers in Jesus Day*, Fullerton: IFL, 1990, p. 96.

- endless life, peace joy and
- the presence of God forever.

Behind this door is

- the blackness of darkness forever in unquenchable fire,
- worms that never die and
- the horror of knowing you made the eternally wrong choice.

CHOICES: Only Jesus could be so bold as to say there is no middle road on the highway to heaven. Its all or none. Its receive the free gift of eternal life or reject it. No choice is to make the answer to Him be NO. As Moses so aptly said it:

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20 I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, *that* I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live: That thou mayest love the LORD thy God, *and* that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him: for he *is* thy life, and the length of thy days: that thou mayest dwell in the land which the LORD sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them. (KJV)

What will it be? The choice is yours. Which dying thief are you? Where will you be one minute after you die?