



## Luke 23: 32-43

### Eternal Life Today

On the south coast of China on a hillside overlooking the harbor of Macao, Portuguese settlers once built a massive cathedra. But a typhoon proved stronger than the works of man's hands and the walls and fortress of the old fort have long ago come and gone. Some centuries ago the cathedral fell in ruins except for the front wall. High on the top of that jutting wall is a great bronze cross. Throughout the last several centuries thousands have been reminded of life in the One who died on another cross. Ships have gone down in the traitorous waters of the South China Sea and men have clung by faith to the One who died for them on the Cross of Calvary.

In 1825 Sir John Bowering was shipwrecked there. Clinging to the wreckage of his ship, at long last he caught sight of that great cross, which showed him where he could find safety on the shore. This dramatic rescue moved him to write:

In the cross of Christ I glory,  
Towering o'er the wrecks of time;  
All the light of sacred story,  
Gathers round its head sublime.

The apostle Paul said, "For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (2 Cor. 2:2). Again he said, "We preach Christ crucified" (1:23).

I ask you to consider with me the second word that Christ spoke from the Cross. There were three men dying on crosses at Calvary.

The execution was carried out outside the walls of the city of Jerusalem. The three men carried their own crosses. The person crucified died a thousand deaths that day. Large nails were driven through their hands and feet (Jn. 20:25; Lk. 24:40). The victims suffered from severe inflammation, swollen wounds around the nails, pain from torn tendons, burning thirst, a strained position that made exhaling nearly impossible. Finally when they could no longer push themselves up by their feet they could exhale no longer and suffocated.

Moreover, in the suffering of Jesus only the damned in hell would know what He endured on the cross. Even then, they could not enter into the depths of His suffering because they were guilty sinners, but Jesus was the innocent suffer from heaven. He was sinless. He never experienced personal sin. He was suffering the spiritual death of all the accumulated debt of every sinner throughout history.

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Thousands of people were gathering in Jerusalem that day for the Passover celebrations. No doubt many were passing down the road and would witness firsthand the crucifixion. As they gathered about the cross, staring, gazing, and looking upon the horrible scene the religious leaders were leading them on in sheer hatred toward Jesus.

All this time Jesus kept on saying, how many times we do not know: "Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing. "

## **THE CROSS OF REBELLION (Luke 23:35)**

This criminal was rebellious to all that was going on around him. He is described as a criminal. The word means doers of evil things. Both Mark and Matthew describe him as a outlaw, or revolutionary and insurrectionist. This is no common criminal. This was his habitual way of life. He had a long criminal record. No doubt this man had been a rebel at heart all his life.

### ***Rebelling against Rome***

Perhaps he was rebelling against the Roman government. Possibly he wanted to free his people from Roman control and had tried by legitimate means, but was disappointed by his zealot friends when his organized efforts failed. Then he organized a guerrilla band to fight the Romans. Now on this cross he is rebelling against all the Romans stood for –law, order, peace, justice, etc.

### ***Rebelling against society***

He was rebelling against society. He is characterized as a criminal. He had gone about the countryside robbing, murdering and raping. He hated the mob that was wagging their heads and shouting at him. He was rebelling against everything society stood for.

### ***Rebelling against religion***

No doubt he was rebelling against organized religion of his day. The religious leaders were stirring up the mob to frenzy. He hated everything the pious Jews stood for, and loved. No doubt, he had broken all their commandments. "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain. "

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. "Honor your father and your mother. "Do not steal. "

### ***Rebelling against God***

But tragically he was rebelling against the LORD God. He was rebelling against His love. The historian Luke tells us, "And one of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him saying, 'Are You not the Christ [the Messiah]? Save Yourself and us!' (v. 39). The words "hurling abuse" literally means "blaspheming." This rebel railed on, taunted, hurled insults, and began to blaspheme against Jesus. For all we know he had never seen

and began to blaspheme against Jesus. For all we know he had never seen Jesus before this day. But he was echoing all he heard the priests and people shouting.

The religious leaders were not content that they had succeeded in having Jesus crucified. The chief priests, scribes and elders were busy stirring up the people to heap insults on Jesus (Matt. 27:41). They were sneering at the crucified enemy. They shouted that He could save others, but if He really were the Messiah surely He could save Himself.

This criminal echoed the rulers who were sneering at Him saying, He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One (v. 35). The word for sneering or scoffing means literally to turn his or her nose up at someone. They were sneering, jeering and making fun of Jesus. But it was not just a passing gesture. The original language tells us that they kept it up. The activity went on for sometime. It is action in the past that continues over a period of time. They kept shouting at Him, You saved others from death, save yourself! If You are the Messiah, the Anointed of God, save Yourself.

He echoed the soldiers mingling about the cross in verses 36-37. Pilate had been used in this terrible ordeal so he took out his rage by having the soldiers put a written accusation above the head of Jesus that read:

This is the King of the Jews (v. 38). That was Pilate's way of getting even and mocking the Jewish leaders. They continued to come up holding up their flask of cheap sour wine and making sport of Him mockingly invited Jesus as king to come down from the cross and join them in a toast to His kingdom. The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, and saying, If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself! Someone retorted, How did they know God didn't drink sour vinegar! "

After about an hour of bitter taunt, he continued to plead in his agony, Are You not the Messiah? Save Yourself and us! Don't miss the imperfect tense; he keeps on taunting Jesus over and over again. It is a continuous rage of sarcastic, mocking bitter taunt.

All this rebel wanted was a way of escape. He looked on the death of Jesus and made his appeal on the level of a prison break. The rebellious criminal kept saying, Are You not the Messiah? Save Yourself and us! " Come on down from the cross and take us with You. We'll join you in Your crusade against Rome.

The paradox is though he rebelled against all the forces he was caught up by them and echoed their rebellious cry as if it were his own.

In essence he was saying, Jesus take me down from this cross. I don't mind being a sinner, but I do not wish to suffer for my crimes. I don't mind being what I am. I have no objection to being a criminal.

### ***We are all rebels at heart***

Lest we get too hardened against this rebel we need to keep in mind that we all have a tendency to rebel against God. We may not be a robber, or murderer, or insurrectionist, but deep down in our heart of hearts we say no to Jesus.

The Hebrew prophet Jeremiah said, The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked (17:9). The prophet Isaiah echoed our hearts when he wrote in 53:6,

All of us like sheep have gone astray,

All of us like sheep have gone astray,  
Each of us has turned to his own way;  
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all  
To fall on Him.

And in 64:6 he wrote,

For all of us have become like one who is unclean,  
And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment;  
And all of us wither like a leaf,  
And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

The Bible makes it very clear that we have all come short of God's expectations. We have all come short of His perfect standards. That is what it means when it says, "We have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). We have gotten an "F" on our spiritual report card. We fall short of His perfect holiness. Our sin and unbelief separates us from God who is perfect holiness, righteousness and justice. The prophet Habakkuk wrote, "Thine eyes are too pure to approve evil, and Thou canst not look on wickedness with favor . . ." (1:13a). Therefore there is a severe penalty against all sin. "The wages of sin is death . . ." (Romans 6:23).

Not only do we find a cross of rebellion, but also a cross of repentance at Calvary.

### **THE CROSS OF REPENTANCE (Luke 23:40-42)**

The other criminal who was being crucified with Jesus also got caught up in the riot for some time. There was everything to obscure his vision just like the rebellious thief. Matthew tells us "And the robbers also who had been crucified with Him were casting the same insult at Him" (27:44). Both of the criminals were joining in heaping the insults on Jesus. What were those insults? Matthew writes, "In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking Him and saying, He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe in Him. He trusts in God; let God rescue Him now, if He delights in Him; for He said, I am the Son of God." (vv. 41-43).

#### ***This man saw himself as a sinner***

But this second thief finally came to his senses. He turned on and interrupted the other thief rebuking him. Luke continues, "But the other answered, and rebuking him said, 'Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong'" (23:40-41). He sternly reprimanded the other dying thief.

It is an enduring fear of God, present tense that grips his soul. Do you not dread a holy and righteous God? The thief reminds us of Hebrews 9:27-28. And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment, so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him. The same writer said, "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:31). We live in a generation and society that has no earthly idea what that means. Nor does it wish to know.

This thief saw himself as a sinner, a rebel against God. He changed his mind toward God. "And we indeed suffer justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:41). In essence he was saying, let's quit playing the blame game. You and I are guilty.

23:41). In essence he was saying, let s quit playing the blame game. You and I are guilty.

He was willing to be saved. He could not save himself physically. More importantly he could not save himself spiritually. He could not come down from the cross and get baptized. He could not go and do good works. He couldn t join a church. All that sinner could do was cast himself on God s grace!

He confessed his need of Jesus as his Savior. We indeed justly. We are receiving what we deserve echoes from his lips.

### *He recognized Jesus as his only Savior*

The criminal kept on saying, Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom! (v. 42).

This thief saw the possibilities of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. He kept on saying over and over again, Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom! ”

This was not a lone shot at random into the sky. This man kept storming the ears of the Savior. Jesus, Jesus, remember me. . . Jesus when You come into Your kingdom. . . Jesus, Jesus. . . These words kept pounding the ears of Jesus. There is complete confidence in his words as he cries out, Jesus, Jesus. Remember me. He did not pray, if, but when. ”

The words of this penitent thief reminds us of Romans 10:9-10, 13. Paul writes, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. . . for Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved. ”

There was a spiritual war taking place on Mount Calvary that day. One thief is calling out for Jesus to come down from the cross, and the other pleading for Jesus to save him spiritually. What will Jesus do?

Lest we should forget Jesus has also been praying over and over again, Father forgive them . . . Father forgive them; for they know not what they are doing. Father forgive . . . ”

Grace is not clemency. Salvation is not pardon without payment for the crime against God. God is a righteous God and someone has to pay the penalty for our sins. Jesus is on the cross of redemption paying the price of our redemption in full.

## **THE CROSS OF REDEMPTION**

The cross on which Jesus died tells us about redemption. Jesus is not dying because He was bad, but because He was supremely good. Both criminals keep up their plea. Christ must make a decision. Come down from the cross and save all three, or endure the cross and its shame and win a kingdom. Save self! Save souls! Which shall it be? Heaven waits. All the saints in heaven strain breathlessly wondering what will He do.

The power of His sovereign grace kept Him on the cross. He was sacrificing Himself as their Substitute.

### *Jesus was dying as our Substitute*

The apostle Paul tells the reason why Jesus endured the cross. For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good

man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:6-8). Jesus was not dying as a martyr, or a criminal. He was dying as my representative in my place on the cross. He was dying in my place on the cross and my substitute. He was paying my sin debt to the righteousness of God. He [God] made Him [Jesus] who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Once again we note carefully the original language in Luke's description. It is a once and for all decision that Christ makes. Jesus said. It is past tense. There is no need for repetition. Jesus answered once and for all. He doesn't repeat his words. These are solemn, emphatic, affirmative words of Jesus. What does He say?

Jesus said, Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise (v. 43).

Amen, certainly, for sure, beyond doubt. It is a great word of assurance. Truly I say to you. These are words of commitment, confidence and assurance. Amen, I will not fail you. I will go through with it for you. You can depend on me. ”

Today Before sundown. The Jewish day came to an end at sundown when the light of the first star began to shine. Before the end of sundown today you will be with me in Paradise. ”

You will be with Me in Paradise. Wherever Jesus was going the man was going. Paradise is always used of another name for heaven (2 Cor. 12:2, 4; Rev. 2:7). It is a garden place, a place of beauty and repose. It is a prepared place for a prepared people. The night before Jesus had made this promise to His disciples as He comforted them concerning His own death. He said, Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself, that where I am, *there* you may be also (John 14:1-3).

### ***Salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone***

This is vital theology for us today. Today, not tomorrow. The penitent sinner did not have to wait until the Messiah comes in glory. Today, tells us that both of them, the sinner and the Savior, will enter together into the Father's presence in heaven! I solemnly say to you, this very day you will be in Paradise with Me. ” What assurance to a dying thief. Whisper those words in my ears when you are ready to pull the sheet over my head! I stake eternity on these words of Jesus.

Peter tells us in Acts 4:12, There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved. ”

The death of Jesus Christ is sufficient to make you right with a holy and righteous God. You do not need to add anything else to what Christ did for you on the Cross. His death and resurrection are sufficient to save the worst of sinners. You do not have to add your suffering to the suffering of Jesus. In fact, if you add one touch of your own suffering to His suffering you destroy His atonement for your sins. His death alone is sufficient to save your soul. This vile sinner was instantly transformed into a saint fit for heaven. He did not have to go to some imaginary place and suffer for his sins. Jesus clothed the believing thief in His own spotless righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21).

The thief on the cross was saved without recourse to baptism, church membership, Lord's Supper, sacraments, good works, etc. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it* is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in

Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them (Ephesians 2:8-10). You do not need to perform any sacraments; you only need the blood of Jesus to cover all your sins.

Today the redeemed thief would be in conscious presence of fellowship with his Savior in Paradise, while his body disintegrated in the refuse of Gehenna outside the city walls of Jerusalem. On whatever day you die you go straight to be with Jesus. Today, whatever our today is we will close our eyes in death and be ushered into His presence to be with Him for all eternity. For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life . . . for we walk by faith, not by sight —we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:4, 7-8). The soul does not go to sleep; the body does until the great resurrection day.

Today! On the same morning the despondent criminal was stumbling around in the darkness on the dirt floor of his prison cell he was rejoicing with His Savior that evening walking on the pure celestial streets of heaven.

There is another great truth in this lesson. Only one thief was saved that day at Calvary. Jesus did not say, Today both of you will be with Me. He did not say in the end all will be saved regardless of their personal choices. He did not teach universal salvation for the whole world. Only one thief called upon Jesus to save him that day. Only one was saved. Only one will spend eternity in heaven with Jesus. That truth is still true today. No, not everyone is going to the same place! Those who choose to not receive Christ spend eternity in hell.

It took faith for the dying man to trust another dying man for eternal life! This is probably the greatest example of saving faith in the New Testament. It is an example for each of us today. The one making the promise dies first! The thief is saved by faith alone in Jesus alone. Jesus presented to His Father on that day a trophy of grace! Remember me. . . Remember me! You shall be with Me, close to My side today. This day you shall be with Me! ”

Have you come to the place in your spiritual life that you know that if you died today you would go to heaven?

Let's suppose that if you died today and stood before the Lord God and He said, Why should I let you into My heaven? What would you say? What do you think you would say?

### *Señor are you ready to die?*

I have a friend who lives in Central America. His name is Jacobo. At one time in his life he was a successful organizer for communist trade unions among the banana workers. His life was powerful, with plenty of influence, lots of money and women on the side. He had everything he wanted in life.

But other union leaders hated him. One day his driver bodyguard drove up to a four way stop on a highway outside of town. Suddenly a jeep pulled up in front of them and another pulled up from behind and gunmen jumped out of the vehicles and riddled Jacobo's car with machinegun bullets.

His driver slumped over on him with his blood pumping out all over his body saying, Jacobo, don't let me die. In a matter of minutes he lay dead.

Another car pulled up a few minutes later and dragged Jacobo's limp body out of his vehicle and drove him to

Another car pulled up a few minutes later and dragged Jacobo's limp body out of his vehicle and drove him to a hospital. A Christian medical doctor bent over Jacobo's limp body on the operating table and said, "Señor, are you ready to die? You probably won't make it through this surgery today."

That surgeon led Jacobo to put his faith in Jesus Christ as his savior before surgery began. Then he removed a dozen bullets from Jacobo's body. One of his hands, his shoulder, back and abdominal area have long ugly scars from that surgery. Yes, Jacobo did survive. He remained true to his decision for Christ and the surgeon disciplined him in God's Word. Today Jacobo faithfully serves Christ as a missionary in Central America. He is a living testimony of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ.

No amount of human goodness, human works, human morality, or religious activities can gain acceptance with God. You cannot get to heaven in your own merits. We are all in the same boat spiritually. Religious, non-religious, moral or immoral all still fall short of the glory of God.

He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:5-7).

No amount of human goodness can make you as good as God. He is perfect in His righteousness and He demands that we be perfect. We must be as good as He is. Before Him we stand as naked, helpless and hopeless as the thieves on the cross. The only person who has ever lived a sinless life is Jesus Christ. That is why He died as our Substitute. Because of what Jesus did for you on the cross God can save you today if you put your faith in Him as your Savior. Trust in the person of Christ and His death for your sins right now. Recognize your sinfulness and need to be saved, realizing that no human works can result in salvation, and rely totally on Christ alone to save you. As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name (John 1:12). For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God (John 3:16-18).

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Wil is a graduate of William Carey University, B. A.; New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Th. M.; and Azusa Pacific University, M. A. He has pastored in Panama, Ecuador and the U. S, and served for over 20 years as missionary in Ecuador and Honduras. He had a daily expository Bible teaching ministry head in over 100 countries for ten years. He continues to seek opportunities to be personally involved in world missions. Wil and his wife Ann have three grown daughters. He currently serves as a Baptist pastor and teaches seminary extension courses in Honduras.

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