

We have been journeying with Jesus all along his way to Jerusalem. In today's scripture those who hated him and wanted him destroyed were finally getting their way. It was a very bad day. That last week of His earthly life Jesus instituted Communion (vv. 7–23) and dealt with a running dispute between the disciples over which will be greatest (vv. 24–30). Jesus also warned Peter that he would deny Him (vv. 31–38) and then led His little company to the Mount of Olives and Gethsemane (vv. 39–46). When Jesus is arrested the disciples first try to resist, but then flee (vv. 47–53). Peter follows when Jesus is taken to the high priest's house, and there, outside in the courtyard, Peter denied that he even knew Jesus (vv. 54–62). Then events rush toward their conclusion. Jesus was accused by the leaders of His people, condemned by Pilate, and rejected by the crowds who prefer the release of a terrorist to that of Jesus (22:63–23:25). Now He is crucified as friends, enemies, and bored soldiers look on. It had been prophesied that the Suffering Servant would be “numbered with the transgressors” (Isa. 53:12; Luke 22:37), and two criminals were crucified with Jesus, men who were robbers (Matt. 27:38). The Greek word means “one who uses violence to rob openly,” in contrast to the thief who secretly enters a house and steals. These two men may have been guilty of armed robbery involving murder. It was of set and deliberate purpose that the authorities crucified Jesus between two known criminals. It was deliberately staged to humiliate Jesus in front of the crowd and to identify him with robbers.

When a criminal reached the place of crucifixion, his cross was laid flat upon the ground. Usually it was a cross shaped like a T with no top piece against which the head could rest. It was quite low, so that the criminal's feet were only two or three feet above the ground. There was a company of pious women in Jerusalem who made it their practice always to go to crucifixions and to give the victim a drink of drugged wine which would deaden the terrible pain. That drink was offered to Jesus and he refused it. (Matthew 27:34.) He was determined to face death at its worst, with a clear mind and senses unclouded. The victim's arms were stretched out upon the cross bar, and the nails

were driven through his hands. The feet were not nailed, but only loosely bound to the cross. Half way up the cross there was a projecting piece of wood, called the saddle, which took the weight of the criminal, because otherwise the nails would have torn through his hands. Then the cross was lifted and set upright in its socket. The terror of crucifixion was that—the pain of the process was terrible but it was not enough to kill, and the victim was left to die of hunger and thirst beneath the blazing noontide sun and the frosts of the night. Many a criminal was known to have hung for a week upon his cross until he died raving mad.

The inscription set upon the cross was the same placard as was carried before a man as he marched through the streets to the place of crucifixion.

Did a mention it was a very bad day? Jesus was crucified about 9 A.M. and remained on the cross until 3 P.M.; and from noon to 3 P.M., there was darkness over all the land (Mark 15:25, 33). Jesus spoke seven times during those six terrible hours:

1. “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34).
  2. “Today shalt thou be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).
  3. “Woman, behold thy son” (John 19:25–27).
- [Three hours of darkness; Jesus is silent]
4. “Why hast Thou forsaken Me?” (Matt. 27:46)
  5. “I thirst” (John 19:28).
  6. “It is finished!” (John 19:30)
  7. “Father, into Thy hands” (Luke 23:46).

Luke recorded only three of these seven statements.

While they were nailing Him to the cross, Jesus repeatedly prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Not only was He practicing what He taught (Luke 6:27–28), but He was fulfilling prophecy and making “intercession for *those who were taking his life*, the transgressors” (Isa. 53:12).

It was providential that Jesus was crucified *between* the two thieves, for this gave both of them equal access to the Savior. Both could read Pilate’s superscription, “This is Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews,” and both could watch Him as He graciously gave His life for the sins of the world.

The one thief imitated the mockery of the religious leaders and asked Jesus to rescue him from the cross, but the other thief had different ideas. He may have reasoned, “If this Man is indeed the Christ, and if He has a kingdom, and if He has saved others, then He can meet my greatest need which is salvation from sin. I am not ready to die!” It took courage for this thief to defy the influence of his friend and the mockery of the crowd, and it took faith for him to trust a dying King! When you consider all that he had to overcome, the faith of this thief is astounding.

Jesus took the time, in the midst of his suffering and dying, to save this man wholly by grace; it was the gift of God (Eph. 2:8–9). The man did not deserve it and he could not earn it. His salvation was personal and secure, guaranteed by the word of Jesus Christ. The man hoped for some kind of help in the future, but Jesus gave him forgiveness that very day, and he died and went with Jesus to paradise (2 Cor. 12:1–4). That’s how important the man was and how important everyone is that comes to Jesus and asks for forgiveness and salvation. Jesus promises to be with us. We must remember as we read or hear the passion account that Jesus didn’t die just for the nice people of this world. Jesus paid the price for all human-kind’s sins, that all who believe might be with Him in paradise.<sup>1</sup>

Legend has been busy with the penitent thief. He is called variously Dismas, Demas and Dumachus. One legend makes him a Judean Robin Hood who robbed the rich to give to the poor. The loveliest legend tells how the holy family was attacked by robbers when they fled with the child Jesus from Bethlehem to Egypt. Jesus was saved by the son of the captain of the robber band. The baby was so lovely that the young brigand could not bear to lay hands on him but set him free, saving, “O most blessed of children, if ever there come a time for having mercy on me, then remember me and forget not this hour.” That robber youth who had saved Jesus as a baby met him again on Calvary; and

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<sup>1</sup>Richards, Lawrence O.: *The Bible Readers Companion*. electronic ed. Wheaton : Victor Books, 1991; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996, S. 673

this time Jesus saved him. We don't know whether there is any truth to this story, but we know that Jesus promised that the man would be with Him in Paradise.

The word Paradise is a Persian word meaning *a walled garden*. When a Persian king wished to do one of his subjects a very special honor he made him a companion of the garden which meant he was chosen to walk in the garden with the king. It was more than immortality that Jesus promised the penitent thief. He promised him the honored place of a companion of the garden in the courts of heaven.

Surely this story tells us above all that it is never too late to turn to Christ. There are other things of which we must say, "The time for that is past. I am grown too old now." But we can never say that about turning to Jesus Christ. As long as a person's heart beats, the invitation of Christ still stands. As the poet wrote of the man who was killed as he was thrown from his galloping horse,

"Betwixt the stirrup and the ground,

Mercy I asked, mercy I found."

It is literally true that while there is life there is hope.<sup>2</sup> No matter our situation in life, no matter what we have done, Jesus is willing and able to save. He promised "I will be with you in Paradise! I am with you, I will be with you, always, even to the end of the age."<sup>3 4</sup> Thanks be unto God!

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<sup>2</sup> Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Gospel of Luke*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible Series, Rev. Ed), S. 284

<sup>3</sup>Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Lk 23:32

<sup>4</sup>Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:262