

The Thief on the Cross

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References: **Luke 23**, Isaiah 55:11; Mark 14:1-11; Isaiah 53:12; Matthew 27:40; Mark 15:30; Matthew 7:13; Romans 6:23; John 1:1; John 1:29; Hebrews 4:15; Acts 3:17-18; Matthew 16:15-17; Jonah 3:4-6; Jonah 4:11; Luke 24:13-21; Hebrews 11:1

Morning everyone. Just before I start, I wanted just on the **behalf** of the assembly, welcome back Norma and Harold. It's great to have you fellowshiping with us again. So, welcome back. I'm going to give a message; it's a bit of a leftover message that I gave earlier in the week at Parkdale Manor. So Shirley and Winifred, you've heard this before, so apologies. It's a leftover. Hopefully, when it's reheated, it'll still taste as good.

So let's turn to Luke 23, and we're going to be looking at the story of the thief on the cross. Luke 23, and we're going to begin the reading in verse 32 up until verse 43.

[Luke 23:32-43 NKJV]

³² There were also two others, criminals, led with Him to be put to death. ³³ And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left. ³⁴ Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." And they divided His garments and cast lots. ³⁵ And the people stood looking on. But even the rulers with them sneered, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God." ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine, ³⁷ and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself." ³⁸ And an inscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek,

Latin, and Hebrew: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. ³⁹ Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us." ⁴⁰ But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? ⁴¹ And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." ⁴³ And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

Let's just bless the reading of God's word. Yes, Heavenly Father, thank you for this day and thank you for your living word. The word that goes out and when it comes back, it's not in vain or empty, but shows us your will and purpose.

[Isaiah 55:11 NKJV]

So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth;
It shall not return to Me void,
But it shall accomplish what I please,
And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.

As well, Lord, we thank you for this victory on the cross and the victory and resurrection that we're all here today to remember. Please be with us in our time of fellowship and study. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.

The Literal Sandwich

So in the Gospel of Mark, Mark uses this theme, this kind of structural theme, way of writing things, and it's called the Markan sandwich. And essentially what it is, it's an idea that is bracketed by another idea. And oftentimes Mark uses it to show a contrast between the two.

A famous occurrence of a Markan sandwich is Mark 14, when Mary anoints Jesus with that spikenard oil. And it's this wonderful demonstration of devotion and sacrifice and worship that she gives.

[Mark 14:1-11 NKJV]

¹ After two days it was the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes sought how they might take Him by trickery and put Him to death. ² But they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar of the people." ³ And being in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, as He sat at the table, a woman came having an alabaster flask of very costly oil of spikenard. Then she broke the flask and poured it on His head. ⁴ But there were some who were indignant among themselves, and said, "Why was this fragrant oil wasted?" ⁵ For it might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor." And they criticized her sharply. ⁶ But Jesus said, "Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me. ⁷ For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but Me you do not have always. ⁸ She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial. ⁹ Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her." ¹⁰ Then Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Him to them. ¹¹ And when they heard it, they were glad, and promised to give him money. So he sought how he might conveniently betray Him.

Now that wonderful act, Mark brackets it with two horrible acts of betrayal. On one side, it begins with the authorities wanting to arrest Jesus, but they're fearful of doing it over the Passover. And then at the other end, the other side, it's Judas making a commitment to betray Jesus' whereabouts so that he can be captured. So here you have this wonderful act of devotion with two other sides of betrayal. That's a Markan sandwich.

Here in our passage today, we don't have a thematic Markan sandwich; we have a **literal** sandwich. We have Jesus, the righteous

one, flanked on either side by, if I may say so, two stale pieces of bread. Two transgressors, two evildoers, two rebels, two thieves. And we might think of this as a fluke in history or some kind of ironic twist, but that's not the case. Because Isaiah told us that he would be **numbered with the transgressors**. He would be numbered, he would die with the transgressors, with the sinners. And Isaiah had prophesied this 700 years before Jesus was even ever born.

[Isaiah 53:12 NKJV]

Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great,
And He shall divide the spoil with the strong,
Because He poured out His soul unto death,
And He was numbered with the transgressors,
And He bore the sin of many,
And made intercession for the transgressors.

And so no, this wasn't a fluke of history or some kind of ironic twist. This is God's sovereignty and salvation. It's his plan coming forth from the beginning.

The Mockery and the Shift

And so let's look at these two men and their similarities. Well, they're both criminals, they're both thieves. They both have hours to live, so they're both close to death. But they're both equally close to **life**. Because they're both within earshot of Jesus. And they both spoke to him.

In verse 39, we have mockery. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him. "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us." In Mark and Matthew's gospel, some of the soldiers in the crowd, they literally say, "come down from that cross if you want to save yourself."

[Matthew 27:40 NKJV]

and saying, "You who destroy the temple and build it in three

days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross."

[Mark 15:30 NKJV]

save Yourself, and come down from the cross!"

Now, Luke doesn't say that specifically, but what this thief is saying is essentially saying that. He's saying, "Jesus, if you want to save yourself, you're going to have to come down from that cross in order to do it." He's saying, your power is not staying there, but your power is in **escape**. Your power is in evading judgment. And so what he didn't realize was that Jesus didn't have to come down from the cross in order to save him. Yet he could be right there on that cross and still do it.

Then something shifted. Because this one mocking criminal rebuked him, and the other almost had a kind of an epiphany of sorts. Because what he says is not in a mocking tone. It's verse 40 and verse 41.

[Luke 23:40-41 NKJV]

⁴⁰ But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? ⁴¹ And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong."

The Three R's

Verses 40 and 41, they have what I would consider **three R's**. The first R is **Reverence**. The second R is **Reckoning**. And the third R is **Recognition**.

So let's start with that first R, that **reverence**. The repentant thief says, "Don't you fear God?" It's interesting because this man had a judgment. They all had judgments that were given to them, earthly judgments. But what he's saying to him is, you know, there's going to be a judgment coming pretty soon. That's a divine, eternal judgment.

Shouldn't you be possibly not mocking the one God that can save you in this instance? He's so concerned with what the world's doing to him that he's not thinking about the bigger picture here. That's the reverence.

And then it's the **reckoning**. He says, "We're punished justly. For we are getting what our deeds deserve." This is actually quite refreshing. Because here what the criminal is saying, or the thief, he's saying, "Look, our sinful behavior led us here."

[Matthew 7:13 NKJV]

"Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it.

We walked a wide path, and now we're being paid the wages for our behavior.

[Romans 6:23 NKJV]

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

He's actually taking account for his actions. He's not blaming others for it. There's accountability there. That's the reckoning.

But then we have something even more interesting, and that's the **recognition**. Because he says, "This man has done nothing wrong." The word "wrong," Luke uses this word, atupon. It's spelled A-T-O-P-O-N. A-T-O-P-O-N. And it's Greek for **out of place**. Out of place. And you can think of it as not fitting or not matching.

So if you showed up to a funeral and you wore a bathing suit, that would be atupon. That would be out of place. That wouldn't be a good fit. But here he's saying, "This man is not wrong. This man is not atupon." That means this man is not out of place. This man is actually **in place**.

Psychologically, we could say this man is in place. This man is in alignment, not misalignment, with the Father's will. This man is order, not disorder. He's order in the sense of that divine logos that John speaks about.

[John 1:1 NKJV]

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

And so no, this man is not out of place. He's in place. And we can think of this here in a larger theme. He's not talking about innocence or guilt as we come to understand it in legal terminology; he's speaking to a different kind of innocence.

[John 1:29 NKJV]

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

It's an innocence that we speak of when we talk about Jesus being the perfect, unblemished Lamb of God. Tempted in all ways and yet did not sin.

[Hebrews 4:15 NKJV]

For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.

And so no, he was not out of place. He was in place. Literally in place at that moment. And it's remarkable that he could have this insight.

Revelation and Repentance

And I asked myself, where did it come from? Because it seemingly comes out of nowhere. But then we were reminded that there are

seven sayings that Jesus makes on the cross. And we've done a good job kind of placing them in order. And the first saying actually happens in this chapter. We read it earlier this morning: Verse 34. And Jesus says, "Father, forgive them. For they know not what they are doing." God's full character on display, isn't it? Not a hater of sinners, but one that understands them. Did they fully understand the weight of what they were doing that day?

Peter in Acts chapter 3, he says, you and your rulers crucified him out of ignorance.

[Acts 3:17-18 NKJV]

¹⁷ "Yet now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers. ¹⁸ But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled.

And so God can use anything for his plan to be sprung into action. Even ignorance. Not excusing necessarily, but understanding and forgiving. And who better than a criminal with mere hours to live would understand the importance of that power of forgiveness?

So it's possible that—because we're told that they were on that cross for six hours—we're also told in the beginning in Mark and Matthew's account that both of these thieves were mocking Jesus initially. But sometime within that span of six hours, one of them had a change of heart. And it could have been Jesus' response to the unfairness that was presented before him. He saw in Jesus... for instance, you wouldn't forgive someone, or you wouldn't offer forgiveness to someone who didn't harm you. You offer forgiveness to someone who's done you wrong.

So there could have also been another explanation for this revelation that he had. And that could simply be God gave it to him. Because we read in the Gospels that Jesus asks his apostles, he says, "Who do you say I am?"

[Matthew 16:15-17 NKJV]

¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.

Now for Peter, this is remarkable. Because usually when Peter talks, what happens? It's very impulsive. He ends up eating his words. And sometimes he even gets rebuked. But this time he was quick to answer, but actually it didn't result in a rebuke. It resulted in a blessing. So it's not inconceivable that this revelation that the thief had was a gift of the Holy Spirit. But scripture doesn't exactly say how the thief came to these realizations.

But is it that hard for God to reach a single broken man's heart in a moment of trial? It's not hard at all. It's very easy, actually. And we've seen him do that to entire nations as well. I'm thinking of the story of Jonah. When Jonah arrived in Nineveh, he was a reluctant prophet. And he was tasked with giving a prophecy that actually sounded quite good to Jonah. It was a very simple prophecy.

[Jonah 3:4-6 NKJV]

⁴ And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" ⁵ So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. ⁶ Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes.

Now, Jonah did not have a problem with that prophecy. In fact, he probably looked forward to it. So that wasn't the problem. The problem he had was he had to warn others about it. That was his issue. And the interesting thing is they responded. How did they know to respond the way they did? It said he had to travel three days

to fully access the city. That's how large it was. But you saw on that first day there was already a response. It said the Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed. And all of them from the greatest to the least put on sackcloth. How great was this revival? Well, the people did it before the king even found out about it. The king was the last one to figure it out.

When the warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from the throne and took off his royal robes and covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. And he had issued a proclamation that essentially was what the people were already doing. Now, it's great that the royal decree came, but this was already a bottom-up revival that was happening. That was how great that response was.

And then the book ends with Jonah sitting outside the wall and he's sulking. He says, "God, I told you that this was going to happen. I told you that you're so good and kind and gracious and loving. I told you that you were going to save them." And then God ends with this wonderful explanation.

[Jonah 4:11 NKJV]

And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left--and much livestock?"

We have an expression in English and the expression goes like this: It says, "I know it like the back of my hand." These people didn't know the backs of their hands. They didn't even know which hand was left or right. There was such a spiritual blindness and confusion and darkness in the land that only God's intervention could save them. And grace doesn't come from a natural moment necessarily; it comes as a breakthrough.

A Statement of Faith

Now, going back to our passage in Luke 23, we already have that wonderful insight of this man saying that Jesus was not aton, right? Was not out of place. But then he makes an even more startling revelation. He says to Jesus in verse 42: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." This is a wonderful example of faith because there is **zero evidence** of a kingdom here.

Most people on the ground looking up at those three would not think that Jesus was about to enter anything except an early grave. There was no promise of a kingdom here. And yet, this man looked at Jesus and he saw **hope**. It was a hope that his own disciples didn't necessarily have.

Earlier on in our service, Harold talked about the two walking along the road to Emmaus. And eventually they came to an understanding, but initially they didn't. Jesus walks up to them incognito, unrecognized, and he essentially says, "Why the long face?" And the response is very interesting.

[Luke 24:13-21 NKJV]

¹³ Now behold, two of them were traveling that same day to a village called Emmaus, which was seven miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And they talked together of all these things which had happened. ¹⁵ So it was, while they conversed and reasoned, that Jesus Himself drew near and went with them. ¹⁶ But their eyes were restrained, so that they did not know Him. ¹⁷ And He said to them, "What kind of conversation is this that you have with one another as you walk and are sad?" ¹⁸ Then the one whose name was Cleopas answered and said to Him, "Are You the only stranger in Jerusalem, and have You not known the things which happened there in these days?" ¹⁹ And He said to them, "What things?" So they said to Him, "The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to be condemned to death, and crucified Him. ²¹ But we were hoping that it was He who was going to

redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, today is the third day since these things happened.

They say, "Jesus of Nazareth, whom we **had** hoped." They were Jesus' own disciples, and yet at that moment they were despondent. They didn't have an understanding. This thief looked at Jesus on the cross and he saw hope. It's the hope we read about.

[Hebrews 11:1 NKJV]

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

The statement when he says, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." It's a wonderful statement of faith. It's one of the most beautiful ones in all the New Testament. And it also ends up being his last words. What a testimony that is.

Better Early Than Late

Now, first of all, before I continue, I want to apologize to Phoebe, because I think I might be speaking too quickly—if I am, Phoebe, my apologies. But I just want to say, I want to also say that this story here is a bit of a cautionary tale. And the cautionary tale is this: Some people may hear this story and they think, "Oh, I can time my salvation." They may think, "I can live the way I want, do the things I want, and just before the party's over, just before that door closes, I can just sneak in."

And I think we see the folly in that understanding. So I'm going to ask you to raise your hands. How many of you have been on vacation before and you missed your flight? How many of you have been on vacation and your flight was delayed? How many of you have been on vacation and your flight was cancelled? For those of you that haven't raised your hand, I want to travel with you. Because you have a tremendous amount of luck. But I think we understand the truth here, is that we spend hours and hours trying to plan and time our

vacation. Well, what makes us think we can do any better by planning and timing our salvation? We can't. It's not in our hands.

How about us looking outward? Are we like Jonah? Do we try and time and plan the salvation of others? Are there people who we share the gospel with and we say, "Well, I shared the gospel with them once and they weren't very responsive, and so it's a lost cause, I'll just move on." Or do we say, "Oh, well, these people's lives, they're pretty messy and I'm going to wait for their lives to be in order. I'm going to wait for them to get their act together and then I'll share the gospel." In a sense, you're trying to time salvation here as well.

I'm going to share a story about testimonies and it took place at our daily vacation Bible school here at **16th Avenue Gospel Chapel**. Happened a couple of years ago and a man by the name of David Dunlap shared his testimony. Some of you may know David. And Harold, that day you shared your testimony as well. And David shared his testimony and there were a lot of similarities between the testimony of David and Harold. Harold, if I'm not mistaken, you came to faith at seven? Okay. And David came to faith in his 20s.

But both of them grew up in a Bible-believing home. Both of them attended church, prayed at home. But there was a discrepancy there. And we have the children in daily vacation Bible school sitting in these front rows. And Harold addressed the children directly after they heard both the testimonies. And he said, "Who had the better testimony?" That's what he asked these kids. And like all good teachers, he just sat there with the question. He just let them think.

And I was sitting in the back row where Winifred is—I might have worn your seat. But yeah, I was sitting right where you were Winifred. And I also was thinking about that question. Who had the better testimony? Now I thought about it and I said, "You know what? They're both good. They're both good because they both came to know God." And then Harold gave the answer. Harold looked at those kids and he said, "Who had the better testimony? **I** had the better testimony," he said.

And then it struck me. Because while it's true they both came to God, can we not see the missed opportunities in coming to God later? Then I thought of my own testimony. I came to faith at 45, not 7, not 20. That's a lot of missed opportunities. That's a lot of walks that weren't on that narrow path. That's a lot of time not connecting with God through prayer, that relation. Not studying God's living word. Not fellowshiping with the saints. Not serving obediently. I mean, the list can go on and on. And so while it's true that story of better late than never is true, I think we can also agree that better early than late is better.

Today in Paradise

So going back to Luke 23, the thief makes this wonderful plea to him. He cries out to Jesus and he says, "Remember me when you enter your kingdom." And what's beautiful about it is Jesus doesn't respond with silence. He actually responds. And he says something beautiful. He says, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

When I spoke this message at Parkdale on Wednesday, there was someone who I think is new to the Bible and is hearing these things for the first time. And when they heard this passage, you know what they said? They actually said something. They couldn't even control themselves. They said, "Wow. Wow. Amen." They said, "Wow." But they didn't end with just "Wow." They continued. They said, "Wow. **What an honor.** What an honor."

I think that people looking again down at those three would not have seen an honor at all. But this man was given that great honor. And when she said that, it's almost like one time I was in a perfume store with Elena. If she wanted to buy something. And they were giving us these samples of perfume. And it all smelled like roses to me. I couldn't tell the difference. And then they give you this little canister with coffee grounds. And you're supposed to smell the coffee so that it resets your smell. When this woman said, "Wow. What an honor." It really made me rethink that whole scene on the cross. He used these last moments beautifully.

And this is what I also want to say as well. Because some of you may have known friends or family or individuals who had a similar experience as a thief on the cross who came to faith late. And so I want to encourage you that, yes, a true, genuine repentance towards God can result in salvation. Don't have any concerns over that. Our God is anxious, willing, and able to save those who call out in his name. So just rest assured there.

The Last Disciple

Lastly, I want to contrast these last words and the results that came from them with another man's last words and the results. And it's going to start, by the way, of a shoe company. Do you guys know the shoe company Nike? Nike has that little swoosh on the side of its shoe. In 1988, they had a slogan developed for the company. Some of you may know it; it's still used to this day. It's called "Just Do It." That's the slogan. And the ad company came up with it in 1988. And later on, they divulged the source of that slogan. It was the words of a dying man before a firing squad.

This is a true story. It's a dark twist. 1977, there was a convicted criminal. He was on the death penalty. And that was going to be his method of execution. And before the rifles came down, his exact words were, "Let's do it." But the ad company and their wisdom changed it to "Just Do It." But they're both equally dark and nihilistic. They're both, in a sense, a man not even trying to time his salvation, but trying to time his exit.

And we contrast that with this repentant thief, and we see what the waste that was for him to do that. Now, the world, ironically, doesn't see it as a waste. Because that man's last words made a lot of money. A lot of sneakers were sold because of it, right? And so the world would say, no, that's not a waste. That was actually a good outcome. But we see it differently, don't we?

What about this repentant thief's last words? What were those results? What was the result of that? Well, his last words resulted in him being the **last disciple** of Jesus during his earthly ministry. And

also the only individual who was ever given a verbal assurance to be with him that day in paradise. Wow. What an honor.

All right, let's just end with a word of prayer. Yes, Heavenly Father, thank you for this day. And Lord, words cannot fully express our gratitude and appreciation for what you did for us on that cross. And so we'll simply say, as our dear brother Roy does when he opens prayer, we'll simply say, thank you, Father. Thank you for the gift of Jesus Christ. Lord, will you continue to bless our time in fellowship and study this morning and this evening at the Easter conference? We're grateful for each and every one that's gathered here today in remembrance of you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Well done, Leroux. Very good.