



REDEMPTION STORY #5

It's Not Too Late

The Redemption of the Thief on the Cross

THE STORY

Luke 23:39-43

One of the criminals who were hanged *there* was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other responded, and rebuking him, said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" ⁴¹ And we indeed *are suffering* justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our crimes; but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom!" ⁴³ And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

We've all been there; in trouble and struggling. When you are in the worst possible place in your struggle some "well meaning" individual comes along and decides to ask you why you don't do something about your situation. They may fool themselves into thinking that they are helping, but down deep they enjoy the jabs and pain they put you through. Then there are the others that step up and console you, feel your pain and have kind words. This second group is looking for your best interest and your wellbeing, not their own.

Jesus came to earth from His perfect place in heaven to die to pay the price for my sin and yours. Sometimes people romanticize His death. But make no mistake about it; He suffered like no one else has ever suffered before. Not only had they scourged and beaten him over His last 24+ hours but now they had driven spikes through His hands and feet. He was literally hanging from His outstretched arms creating a stress on His lungs. He was in terrible pain.

Possibly even worse than the physical pain was the torment of knowing that He was carrying the sin of the entire world on His shoulders. He knew that His father was not going to be able to tolerate looking on Him and He spoke to Him in the Matthew 27:46. ⁴⁶ And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabaktanei?" that is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

Now in the midst of all of this one of the criminals that was hanging next to Him was mocking Him. "Are you not the Christ? Save Yourself and us" (Luke 23:39) I am sure that Jesus felt compassion for this sinner who would no doubt be in hell before long. Yet He didn't respond to his mocking. As soon as the man quit his mocking the criminal from the other side of Jesus spoke up saying, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" ⁴¹ And we indeed *are suffering* justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our crimes; but this man has done nothing wrong." (Luke 23:40-41). You see these two men, on either side of Jesus were guilty of crimes and were being rightly punished within the laws of that time. They deserved what they were getting, but this man knew that Jesus was innocent of the charges brought against Him.

Then the criminal that had stood up for Jesus did an amazing thing. With his lungs in a terrible state of trauma he spoke these words, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom!" (Luke 23:42).

**BEAR
MAN**



There was no long prayer admitting His sins, although he had just done so in verse 41. Just speaking to Jesus, "remember me". He acknowledged who Jesus was and that was all it took.

Shortly before His death, Jesus spoke words of deep assurance to this unnamed criminal hanging beside Him. *"Truly I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise"* (Luke 23:43). This simple statement, spoken to a man at the end of his life as he paid the punishment for his crimes, offers unspeakable hope and comfort to all who come after.

Jesus' short, but powerful, conversation with this hopeless man hanging next to Him over two thousand years ago reveals several core truths for us as you consider our own salvation and share with others.



DIGGING DEEPER

1) Do you see yourself in either or both of the thieves on the crosses next to Jesus, How?

2) Have you ever made a clear choice to believe Jesus is who He says He is? When? How?

3) How do you respond when you hear others mocking God?

4) Have you mocked God in the past where others were aware? Are there those that need to hear you make that right with God? Are you willing to go to those that need to hear it? Who are they?

5) Make a list now of those that you feel are too far gone to be reached for God?

6) Now make a plan on how you are going to tell them about Jesus Christ and His love and Mercy.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, I thank and praise You that You sent Jesus to die on the cross on my behalf. There is nothing that I can do to ever repay You for the gift of Your Son. Please give me the boldness and love to correct those that mock You. May I never stand by in silence. Give me the words and confidence to tell all those that I come in contact with about Your sacrifice and love for us. In Jesus name, Amen.



WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS SECOND THIEF AND HIS FAITH?

WHAT DID IT MEAN TO THEM

1) We all must make a choice regarding Jesus.

In the passage that we read at the beginning of this study (Luke 23:39-43) we get just a very brief look at the two men that died when Jesus did. We know that one hung on either side of Him, right and left. But beyond that we know nothing about them, until they open their mouths and speak. Even then we know nothing of their backgrounds. Had these men seen Jesus in the cities and country sides as He traveled and spoke? Did they know that He had done miracles? Had they seen the lives that were changed by His love and His life? Had they been raised in Jewish homes and taught to watch for the Messiah's coming?

Both of these men faced certain death and they each had to make a choice that day. One man mocked and rejected Him, sealing his own fate. The other man believed that the Jesus that hung alongside him held salvation within Him and trusted that He was who He claimed to be.

God offers each of us the same choice at some point in our lives. He offers this through the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. Like the criminal that rejected Jesus we have that right to reject Him and His gracious gift. Or like the criminal that believed in Jesus as the Messiah, we can accept the gift. We must make a choice and by choosing to reject Him we've sealed our own fate, like the first criminal.

The words of John, speaking exactly to this choice and the situation of the two criminals, "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:12). We see this profound verse played out in the short story. They each made a choice and it had eternal consequences.

2) No one is beyond hope.

All too often we look at someone we come in contact with and think of them as unreachable for Christ. People seem so far from God that they could never turn their lives over to Him. These people I consider to be like the first thief that was mocking Jesus. We see them all the time on television, those that mock God vocally for all the world to see. We see them online where they can be hidden and still speak their hearts. We so often think, "no hope for them". When I have had those thoughts my mind immediately goes to the Apostle Paul. Here was a man that was out killing Christians in the streets. He was hunting them down, one by one and silencing them. Yet, the man murdering God's own children was not unreachable when He wanted them for His kingdom.

The thief that rebuked the other hanging near him would seem to be one of these people. Some historians believe that this man was most likely a ruthless or violent thug that had been sentenced to die. He wasn't someone that took a coin from someone else, no, he had committed something far more serious to be sentenced to death. Yet, with a single sentence, "remember me when You enter Your



kingdom” he was forgiven of all his sins and received eternal life with his savior. With few words the mighty power of the Love of God redeemed this thief turned saint right then and there, “Today you will be with Me in paradise”. (Luke 23:43)

This gives great hope to those of us who have family and friends that would seem as they are unreachable. With the Holy Spirit’s work their eyes can be opened like that criminal on the cross and join the brothers and sisters in heaven.

I have experienced the last minute conversion of people on their deathbed. When in their last days they acknowledge that Jesus is who He said He is and He did what He said He did. It is a miraculous event. I am sure that all the angels in heaven were rejoicing. This is what the scripture is talking about when we read, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31)

3) Jesus loves you and I beyond our comprehension.

I remember it like it was yesterday, my dad and I sitting on the edge of his bed and he shared with me the story of Jesus Christ and his love for me. I remember the bedspread, the dressers, walls, it is all so clear, although it happened nearly 55 years ago. As a youth I rededicated my life to Him several times and tried (and failed) to live up to what God wanted of me. My wife lifted me many times through our marriage when I faltered and she held me up before the Lord all the time.

When I was in my 30’s I was part of the cast for a local production of the Passion Play. I was one of the disciples and things became a little more real as we worked through scenes. Then when it was time to crucify Jesus and I heard the hammer hitting the spikes, as the actors reproduced the crucifixion, it all became very real to me. He did this all just for me. I cried.

Since that time there have been many productions that have shown what went on. I am sure that none of them really fully demonstrates that true physical pain and emotional and spiritual anguish, they always bring me to my knees and tears to my eyes. That day spent on the cross was far more excruciating than any film production could ever capture. Yet as Jesus was brutally beaten and then nailed to the grotesque cross what did He do? In His last minutes He cried out, “Father forgive them for they know now what they do” (Luke 23:34). His final thoughts were on those that would be lost, not on Himself. That is the definition of His love.

4) There is no time between death and new life.

2 Corinthians 5:8 tells us, “but we are of good courage and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.” This would make me believe that there is no time between the two, leaving this body and being in His presence. I’ve heard the story of when Jesus spoke to the criminals from the cross literally 100+ times. It hit me just recently that Jesus was already welcoming the criminal into His Kingdom. It’s like He’s saying, “welcome to the family”.

For those that know Jesus there is no fear in death. There is nothing to fear as the Bible has made it clear that our suffering ends here as we pass from this life to the next. The Apostle Paul wrote, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). There is no gap in between of being in limbo.



In one of the greatest chapters of the Bible, Romans 8 has so many wonderful insights into a walk with God. In this letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul wrote, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39). If we are left for possibly hundreds of years between our death here on earth and our new life in heaven, we would be separated from God. I believe we can rest on the statement of Jesus when He said, "Today you will be with me in paradise". For those that know Him, there is not fear in death.



WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO US

The choice is ours, not everyone receives Christ's free gift of eternal life.

There are two men hung with Jesus on that day. Both of these men deserved to die by the laws of that day. They also deserved an eternity separated from God, a fate worse than death. Both of the men must have had some knowledge of who Jesus was or claimed to be. They had heard the mocking of the crowd. "And the people stood by, watching. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One." ³⁶The soldiers also ridiculed Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, ³⁷ and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!" ³⁸ Now there was also an inscription above Him, "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS." (Luke 23:35-38). I don't believe they didn't know who He said He was and who those there mocking said He was. There were too many miracles that were being talked about for word not to have reached even the lowest of people of the day.

Even with all the evidence one man chose to mock and the other chose to believe. Jesus didn't try to force Himself on the mocker, but He welcomed the other to the kingdom. The first criminal had the same opportunity, he saw the same things happen that day. Yet he made the choice to reject the truth. It is hard for those of us that know Jesus to understand how someone literally waiting to die would have no interest in listening and believing. However, hell is full of those that had their chance and mocked God; sending themselves into an eternity of torment in hell.

As you and I go out and share the message of Jesus and what He did for us we must realize that we will encounter both types of people with both types of responses. We need to realize that we are nothing more than seed planters and those that water the seeds. "So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth." (1 Corinthians 3:7)

When Jesus rose from the grave and appeared to His disciples, on His last moments before ascending into heaven He said this, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20). We are called to "go and make disciples". We don't have the power to save anyone. Jesus does and He did on the cross that day. We have to be willing to share His story and allow Him to do the rest. We have to learn that as sad as it is, not everyone will make the choice to follow Him. Some will never get past being a mocker.

The repentant thief hanging alongside Jesus was a criminal, guilty of crimes that were worthy of death. In a brief moment, Jesus changed everything. Because of his belief, he became a new creation. Old things had passed away, behold all things were new (2 Corinthians 5:17). How about you, have you shown the faith and belief in Jesus Christ?