

“Three Crosses” // Luke 23:32–43 // *The Whole Story* #37

Luke 23, if you have your Bible...

If you’ve driven along the **Blue Ridge Parkway** recently, you might have seen a little sign that says, “**Eastern Continental Divide.**” It’s the line that marks the Eastward and Westward slopes of our continent. Raindrops that fall even an **INCH to the west** of the divide will flow Westward toward the Mississippi River; those that fall to the East go all the way to the Atlantic Ocean.

There’s even a **spot in Glacier National Park, in Montana**, called “Triple Divide Peak.” From that one spot, water flows either to the Pacific Ocean, the Atlantic Ocean, or the Arctic Ocean.

- Think about that: **2 little raindrop friends**, falling casually through the sky, chatting it up... literally can land one centimeter apart and **end up in oceans on opposite sides** of the globe.

The passage we are going to work through **today shows you the dividing line in eternity.** *People very close, very similar in life situations, who fall on opposite sides of this line, end up eternities apart.*

That’s what you are going to see in Luke 23: The **stories of two men**, whose lives are almost identical, but who fall by their own choice on the opposite side of a line, and end up in entirely different places. **And your life will be represented** in 1 of the 2 of them.

Works Consulted:

Tim Keller, “You Will Be With Me”

Louie Giglio, “Paradise in a Garbage Dump”

Chip Henderson, “The Thief on the Cross”

John Piper, “Today You Will Be with Me in Paradise”

Sally Lloyd-Jones, “The Sun Stops Shining”

Let’s look at their stories.

Luke 23:32–43

²⁶ And as they led him away... ³² two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.

(Based on other places this word “criminals” is used, it is mostly likely talking about insurrectionists who wanted to throw off the power of Rome. **Violent, desperate** men.)

³³ And when they came to the place that is called The Skull (or, in Hebrew, “Golgotha”—which means “the skull”—because evidently the rock face looked like a skull), there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

This is the dividing line of history, and at its pinnacle stands a skull with 3 crosses, on 1 of which hangs the Son of God himself, and on the other 2, 2 criminals.

When the **POTUS makes an important speech**, he often **includes with him on stage those most important** to whatever he is announcing: generals in uniform if he’s talking about something military; local leaders; people from the group that his new policy is going to be helping.

Think about this: During the defining moment of God’s work in human history, he chooses to walk onto stage with two random,

unnamed criminals, because that's what his greatest moment was about.

These **3 crosses** are a **microcosm of human history** that tell the whole story of the human race.

We have a **cross of redemption**; a cross of **rejection**; and a cross of **repentance**.

(The Cross of Redemption)

First, let's **talk for a minute about Jesus' cross**—the cross of redemption.

Maybe you wonder how Jesus got on this cross in the first place: After all, the last time we saw him, after all, he was doing miracles and healing people...

Jesus had gotten sideways with both the **religious and the secular leaders** of his day.

- The **religious leaders** were jealous of him, because he threatened their authority.
- The **secular leaders** thought of him as a nuisance who didn't tremble enough before the Almighty power of Rome.
- The **Jewish people were disappointed** that he hadn't thrown off Roman power the way they'd hoped,
- and **his disciples were confused** by him—so one betrayed him and the others abandoned him.

So in a sense, his crucifixion represents the culmination of the collective failure of the human race, caused by our *jealousy, arrogance, apathy, unbelief and cowardice*.

But God, Scripture tells us, had his own purpose in it—something he has been pursuing since the beginning of human history.

- **From the beginning**, God had told his people he would send a **Savior** to take their place under the curse of death.
- He told **Adam and Eve** that he would **send a deliverer** who would crush the serpent of death, but that that serpent would bite the heel of the Deliverer, putting the poison of death into him.
- From that point on in the Bible, he gives **picture after picture** of this...
 - After destroying the world through a global flood in Noah's day, for example, he **set a gigantic "bow"** in the sky—a rainbow—as a symbol that he'd never destroy the world again in that way. The word author uses to describe the bow is "war bow" (like a bow and arrow), and it is aiming back *up* into heaven—a promise that God would **absorb the arrow of his judgment** into himself rather than firing it down into us.
 - When Abraham was about to **sacrifice his son Isaac**, at God's command, God **led him to a lamb caught in the bushes** so that Isaac, his son, could go free.
- The **entire sacrificial system** was built on the concept of an innocent substitute taking the place of the guilty.
 - Once a year each believing family would bring a lamb: a perfect, unblemished lamb, and they would lay it on the altar and place their hand...
- **Isaiah the prophet said that one-day God would send** his Servant to be the lamb who suffered for the sins of the world, that he would be **wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace would be put upon him, and by his stripes we would be healed**.
- **When John the Baptist** saw Isaiah, he said, "Behold the Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world!"
 - **On the head of Jesus** was going to be laid the sins of the entire human race.
- **Martin Luther said, "All the prophets foresaw that on the cross Jesus became the greatest murderer, adulterer, thief, rebel, and blasphemer that there ever was. Our most merciful Father sent**

his only Son into the world and said to him: Jesus, you will become Peter the denier; you will become Paul that persecutor, blasphemer and cruel oppressor; you will become David that adulterer; you will become Adam, that sinner which did eat the apple in Paradise...

- YOU WILL BECOME THE **husband who has neglected** or abused his family.
- The **immoral woman** who has destroyed not only her own life but seemingly every one who come into contact with her
- You will become **the drug addict**
- The **teenage girl** lying to her parents
- The **hypocrite** living a double-life
- The **proud, the selfish, apathetic**
- On the cross, he became our sin, so that from the cross, he could look out at those who had rejected and failed him and pray what he did there in **vs. 34: "Father, forgive them,"**
- He could **extend forgiveness to them** because he was being punished *for* them.

I don't have **a lot of great analogies** for you, but here's one I use with my kids:

- Opt 1: With my kids, I tell this story about a King...
- Opt 2: There once was a pioneering family out on the plain when they see an enormous brush fire headed their way. So the dad gathers the family into a little circle and sets the grass on fire. Then the family huddles in the burnt part as the fire comes by. The fire had already been burned, so they weren't touched. Jesus took the fire into himself so that we could stand on the scorched ground.

I know this might be a little hard to grasp... but think of it this way: when you **forgive somebody**, you absorb the consequences for their action into yourself:

- **Say someone lies about you and destroys your business...** What are your options?
 - Prosecute. **Take away their business** from them.
 - Or just get **back at them by exposing** them.
- **When you forgive**, you let the **sting of that person's sin end in you**, and refuse to retaliate or even the score. You absorb the suffering for their sin.
- **What God did on the cross** was take our place. He suffered so we didn't have to.
- Which is why we say you can **explain the gospel in 4 words:**(Come on church.) **Jesus in my place.**
- It's why we say: **Jesus didn't just die for you.** He died instead of you.

(The Cross of Rejection and the Cross of Repentance)

Now, we turn to the two crosses on either side of him, bearing the two criminals, because they demonstrate the division of the entire human race.

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

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

⁴² And he said, "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."

First, let's talk about **what these two guys have in common.**

- Both were **equally bad**—it doesn't say one was worse than the other.
- In fact, Matthew tells us that **both start out cursing Jesus**¹
- Both **criminals would have been happy for Jesus to save them** from death.
 - In vs. 39, **even the one that ultimately rejects Jesus says**, “If you really are the Messiah, save yourself and us!” He would have loved Jesus to come down off the cross and lead out in a fight against the Romans.

But **one thief began to understand** some things, things that are necessary for true conversion. These three things mark the dividing line of all eternity.

1. He knew the difference in seeking help from God and seeking God for himself

Do you see how, **vs 40, the repentant thief doesn't ask to be taken down from the cross?** I'm sure he'd have been happy if Jesus had offered it. But **all that he is concerned about is being right with Jesus: Remember me when you come into your kingdom.**

This thief realizes that ***what he needs is not a change in circumstance but a change in what his life has been centered upon.***

- ***Instead of asking God*** for the life he wants, he wants to make God his life.

Do you understand the difference—between *seeking God* as the best means to the life you want, and wanting to make God your life?

There's a ***big difference between loving God for himself*** and finding him as a ***useful means*** to an end.

- John Piper says that many people relate to God like a **tire iron**.

- **Tire irons are a really useful instrument**, very helpful in a pinch. But nobody really ***loves a tire iron***.
 - You don't “display it proudly.” You hide it in the trunk.
 - You wouldn't want to be caught without it, but you don't love it.
- **The tire iron is useful for taking care of what you really care about: YOUR CAR.**
- That's how many of us see God.
 - **Useful** for some end we need him more—peace in life, a stable family, going to heaven when we die—but **not beautiful** in and of himself.

Which of those better describes how you see God? Useful or beautiful?

- Do you look to God for the life you want, or do you want to make God your life?

In the same way, there's a **big difference in trying to appease God** and really loving him.

- **We all know the story of the man who is not good to his wife**, mistreats her, neglects her... she threatens to leave, he straightens up, goes to a counselor. And this **works for a while**, but only until he's out of danger, at which point he goes back to his old ways, because he's never dealt with his core problem—he doesn't give his wife the place in his heart she deserves.
- **In the same way, our repentance** has to be a genuine change of heart toward God, not merely an attempt to appease God.

Many people wonder about deathbed conversions: Can someone live an evil life and never do anything good or think about God at all and in the moments before they die, repent to God and go to heaven? YES! Thank God. This story shows you that.

¹ Matt 27:44

- **But it has to be *true* repentance.** It can't be "God, give me my get out of hell free card" without a change of heart that says, "God, up until now, I've centered my whole life on everything but you, and that changes from this moment forward, whether I've got 5 minutes left, or 50 years."

Have you truly repented? *Why do you want Jesus? For a better marriage? Get you out of a jam? To heal you, or prosper you? Heaven?*

- Or do you want him for *him*, even if it means you, for the time being, stay on the cross of... bad health, a bad marriage, etc.
- **You've got to get more serious about your soul than your skin.**

Have you truly repented before God, or have you just tried to arrange a deal with God? Here are some signs you've never really repented:

. You have areas of compromise before God.

- Somehow you **believed this lie that you could accept Jesus** as Savior and not surrender to him as Lord.
- Imagine **getting married and on your first night**, after your reception you say, "That was fun!" And you grab your keys and head to your car and your new wife says, "Where you going?" Back to stay with my other girlfriend again...
- That would **not be a marriage.**
- **People who accept Jesus as Savior** but not Lord are attempting to do the same thing.
- **If he's not your Lord, he's not your Savior**

2. You don't have a growing relationship with Jesus.

- You **don't spend daily time** with him reading his word and praying.
 - After all, if **he is the center** of your life, you will talk with him constantly, study his word.
 - **If your relationship with him consists of hearing a "pep talk" from me every week** and trying to be fairly moral,

but you never really talk to him beyond that, you have no relationship with him.

- **Any more than I'd have a marriage if I** got together with a friend and talked about Veronica for an hour... sang songs about her, but never talked to her. My relationship with her consists of being with her and talking with her all week long.

- Or, you **aren't involved in things like small groups** or Bible studies that will grow your relationship with him.

3. You are not actively involved in his mission.

- Your **attendance in church is sporadic** and you stay on the sidelines.
- **How can you say he is the center of your life** if you are not living out his will for you, doing the things in his ministry he has told you to do?

So, **those are ways that might indicate** you are trying to use God rather than really loving him...

Let's **get back to this repentant thief** and see **what else was true** about him:

2. He understood his guilt before God

- Tim Keller (who stood right here on this stage this week!) says that this **2nd thief says something** that's impossible to admit without God's help: vs. 41, *We are punished justly... getting what our deeds deserve.*
 - As I mentioned, the **word the other Gospels use** for these 2 guys is *lestes* (lay-stay), which means something more like insurrectionist.
 - **Guerilla fighters, freedom fighters.**
 - There's no way he would say that he's fairly/justly being put to death by Rome. He believed that he was fighting for justice. **So what is he talking about?**

- He's not talking primarily about Rome's punishment of him on the cross. He's saying, "We deserve to be abandoned by God to be punished for our sins. We deserve before him to die."
- **Repentance recognizes that sin is 1st and foremost against God.**
 - **King David** committed one of the most egregious public sins in history. He committed adultery with Bathsheba, then murdered one of his best friends, and right hand man-at-arms, Uriah, to cover it up, and then lied about it for a year.
 - When God finally brought him to repentance he writes a Psalm recording that, Psalm 51, and in it he says, "Against you and you only have I sinned." How could he say that? Think of all the people he had hurt: Uriah. Bathsheba. All the people of Israel. It's not that he doesn't recognize this or need to repay him. **It's because God is so big in his mind that this is the most important One he has sinned against.**
- **Is that how you feel about your sin?**
 - Repentance has to be **first vertical before it is horizontal.**
 - There is a **difference**, you see, between **feeling remorse for the mess** sin has made of your life, and feeling **repentance toward God** about it.
 - 2 Cor 7:10, "Godly grief [sorrow, remorse] produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief [sorrow, remorse] produces death."
 - **We think tears = real.** Repentance is not measured by the amount of tears but about whether your heart toward God changes.
- **The sadness you feel about your sin**—is it because of what your sin has done to God, or to others, or to you?
 - **God is the main one** you've sinned against.
 - God is your Creator. He's your judge.
 - He's the one that filled our lives with goodness.

- He's the Father we spurned and whom we pushed out of our lives.
- As long as you think only about the horizontal dimensions of your sin (I hurt my wife, I failed my kids) you'll never really change.

3. He boldly dared upon Jesus' grace

- **When you think about it, what this thief asks is a crazy request:** "*I know you are the **perfect Lord** from heaven, but **whenever you get to wherever** it is you are going—into **whatever reward** you come into—will you **stop and remember** a guy you knew for about 30 minutes **who had done nothing worthy** in his life and was being executed for murder and treason?"*

The only thing crazier than the request is that **Jesus grants it.**

- **Why would he do that?** What did Jesus have to gain from granting this guy's request?
 - This guy is never going to do **anything useful for Jesus.**
 - He **can't help** the cause;
 - he'll never **give his testimony** to a single person,
 - **never go on a mission** trip
 - **or contribute a single \$** to the church.
- **Yet Jesus grants it.**
 - For **God sent not his Son** into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world through him might be saved...
 - *And **we beheld his glory**, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of GRACE...*
- **GRACE is what you show** when you really love somebody.
 - Here we see **the Father in Jesus' parable** welcoming home his lost son.
 - He's **not evaluating what his son will be able to do for him**; or how much it cost to get him back;
 - **He's just so in love** with his lost son that all he thinks about is the joy of having him back.

- (Watching this interaction, I feel like I should take off my shoes, this is holy ground.)

Marvelous grace of our loving Lord, Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt,

Yonder on Calvary's mount outpoured, There where the blood of the Lamb was spilt.

Grace, grace, God's grace, Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;

Grace, grace, God's grace, Grace that is greater than all my sin.

You **may not have anything else**, you may have spoiled your life away. But you **have the ability to reach out to him—to pray**, and that is enough!

Now, vs. 43, look specifically at what Jesus says in response, because there are important things we can learn there, too:

"Today you will be *with me* in Paradise." (Luke 23:43)

- The **key point of emphasis in Jesus' statement** is the phrase "with me." Because the essence of salvation, you see, is being **united with** Jesus.
- Write this down: **Christian conversion is not a change of circumstance**—life doesn't suddenly become smoother; **or even primarily a change of behavior** (you don't immediately become a perfect person), **it is a change of status, a change of position.** You are now identified *with Christ*.
- Some of our **staff team and elders** have been memorizing some parts of Ephesians. In **Eph 2:6**, Paul describes salvation: **"And God**

raised us up with Christ and *seated us with him* [past tense] **in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus."**

- Shouldn't it be *we will be seated* [future tense]? No, we're *positionally already seated in him*.

- **Salvation is a position change.** He takes our sin; we get his position before the Father.
- So Jesus says to the thief, "As of right now, you're *with me*. From this point on, whether living or dying, you'll be identified with me. So, *today*, when you die, you will have as much access to Paradise as I do."

When you get this concept—that conversion is essentially Jesus giving his identity to you as your own—a few important changes happen in your life.

- These almost **serve as tests** to show you whether you have really 'gotten' it.

A. You'll be assured of salvation

- **There's no more, "I hope I make it!"** Or, **"I hope I've been good enough!"** or **"I hope he grades on the curve."** You realize that you are as sure of heaven as Jesus is.
 - **John Bunyan, the writer of *Pilgrim's Progress***, struggled with doubts for years, and he said, "When I got this, I found assurance. I looked up and saw him seated there. He is my salvation and as long as he is there I cannot be lost!" Bunyan: Like a backpack falling off!
 - **1 John 2:1 (Advocate)**. Always thought it was like...
 - **until I read the verses before it (1 John 1:9)**. He **doesn't plead for mercy**, he pleads for justice.
- You say, "Well, I know he's seated there... but how do I know he belongs to me?"
 - **I've claimed him!** Like hand on the head of the lamb. If you place it on Jesus, he'll never move it off!
 - **MORE Questions? SAJIYH**

- **Those who cannot answer the question of whether they know for sure they are saved quite often aren't saved, because they don't understand salvation.** They **still think whether they will go to heaven** is at least partially based on them.
 - **"Are you sure?"** Well, 80%. I'm trying my best. Reading my Bible and asking for forgiveness.
 - **You still think it is about you!**
 - **It's about him.** It is finished. The one work that needed to be done has been done, and offered to you as a gift if you will receive it.
 - **You're saved by works, just not your own.** His works, that you can receive as a gift.
- Then, when that happens, **B. You'll lose your fear of death.**
 - Can you **imagine how this thief's outlook on life changed?** Up until this moment, this had represented the end of everything for him.
 - Now, it is simply the gateway into a new existence.
 - *Listen: I don't want to die. I don't want to leave my kids or my wife. Or you. But I'm not afraid. I know that **before the coroner officially pronounces me dead, I'll be in the presence of Jesus who will welcome me into heaven.***
 - *If I die in the next few years... take care of my kids. But don't grieve for me...*
- And then, after you get this, **C. You'll gain a new confidence in life.**
 - I know this thief doesn't have long to live, but I feel like he **probably quit caring** about all the **people around him: Who cares if the people on the ground** are taunting him, or the religious leaders are condemning him?
 - "Hey, this KING is for me! And he's going into a kingdom that makes this one look like trash and I'm with him!"
 - **When you embrace your position** in Christ, **criticism quits bothering** you as much.
 - **Think of it like this:** If you're a billionaire and you take a cab... Let's say that as you take out money to

pay the driver you drop \$10 and it blows across the street. Are you going to risk your life looking for that \$10 bill—feel like your life is ruined because you lost \$10? You're a billionaire!

- **Let me ask you: Are you a Christian?** Do you toss/turn at night because somebody snubbed you? You're like a billionaire on his knees looking for that \$10 bill! What's the matter with you? You have the approval of the King of Kings? Why are you worried about a \$10 compliment?
- **When you know who you are in Christ, whether or not you succeed in life** becomes less important to you. *"Who cares if I make it big, or everyone knows my name and thinks of me as a success, or if I make lots of money? I have his approval, and a stake in his never-ending kingdom!"*
- **The essence of salvation** is uniting with Christ, where what is his become yours... like marriage.
 - **Veronica took my name!** "On the greatest day of her life, she became a Greear..."
 - ~~Joby's story~~
 - ~~When you know the verdict is in... pressure is no longer on you, and you start to be free.~~
 - ~~Jesus sent out his disciples and they came back rejoicing~~ because the demons were subject to them. Jesus responded, *"So you had a good day. Rejoice not that the demons are subject ... Rejoice that your names are in heaven—that the verdict is already IN."* It's not based on how well you do in your career. And that gives you an incredible freedom.

Conclusion

So, here at the cross we see a microcosm of the whole story of the Bible, the whole story of humanity.

Each of us will be one of these two criminals, and we will share in their destination.

- ~~Some of us will just die~~, without ever bowing the knee to Jesus, and we'll face the judgment of God for our own sins.
- ~~Others of us will bow to him now~~, and we will be with him forever in Paradise.
 - ~~Look, the Bible says that every knee is going to bow.~~ Either now, or at the end.
 - ~~And trust me, it's going to be a lot better~~ for those who bow now.
- **These two thieves looked identical in life.**
 - But right now, as we speak, one of them is in heaven, with Jesus. Maybe listening to this message. Who knows.
 - The other, right now, is in hell.
 - It **all goes back** to what you do with Jesus!

Like these two thieves...

- We are guilty.
- Like them, we are dying. We may not be hanging on a cross a few hours from death, but death is as certain for us as it is for them.
- Like this thief, we can't possibly hope to earn God's salvation.
 - We have **nothing wherewith** to repay God.
 - This **man had no life to offer God** in payment; neither do you.
 - You **may have a few days longer to live than he does, but what you have is just as worthless** to offer to God has what he had.
- And, as with these two thieves, he's **right there**, if you'll choose him.
 - Now, you have to seek him for him, not as a means to an end—a better marriage or successful career
- But he's **right there**: The dying thief rejoiced to see, that fountain in his day, and there may I, though vile as he, wash all my sins away.

Above all, you have to choose him! He's there, but he won't force himself on you:

- One of my profs at college was **an African American gentleman** who had spent the first few years of his adult life in prison for several armed robberies. He told me **that for 3 months** after he was first released every night he considered whether or not to go back to his old lifestyle. **Every night he'd think**, "Should I knock off another convenient store?"
- He got a job at a hotel, **making minimum wage**. Late one night he was assigned to go and clean up a bathroom **covered in the vomit of what looked like 15 people**. Walls were covered, an inch of it on the floor. **He was furious**. As he **worked on his hands** and knees he told himself, "*The only reason they are having me do this is I'm an ex-convict.*" Then, in his mind, he said, "No. It's because I'm black. I've never been given a fair shake because of that and I'll always be thought of as second class."
- He said that **as he cleaned up that vomit**, the Spirit of God came upon him, and he began to realize that **he had a choice**: to keep making excuses and go back to his lifestyle, or repent of his sin and give himself to God.
- He said that **somewhere, in the middle of cleaning up vomit**, his life forever changed. God broke him. He admitted that, yeah, while he had certainly faced discrimination, he deserved what he had received in life. He knew God had better for him. He said, "I was arrested by the Holy Spirit that night, and my soul was set free. I was broken, and then put back together. God released me from my captivity to sin and freed me to a new Master."

We have people like that here this week, who need to make that same decision.

- Like I told you... we church, are a **hospital for the broken**, not a spa for the saved. You need to choose.

- Maybe you're **not a recognized criminal**, but you're under the same condemnation of death for your sin. Ultimately, you are **dying, and you will face judgment**.
- He's **here, ready to save you**, if you'll say to him, "Jesus, I want you. Remember me when you come into your kingdom!"

