

Cross: the Heart of the Gospel

Luke 23:32-43 (New American Standard Bible)

- ³² Two others also, who were **criminals**, were being led away to be put to death with Him.
- ³³ When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the **criminals**, one on the right and the other on the left. ³⁴ But Jesus was saying, “Father, **forgive** them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves. ³⁵ And the people stood by, looking on. 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**.” ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked 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.**”
- ³⁹ 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 answered, 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 deeds**; but this man **has done nothing wrong.**” ⁴² And he was saying, “**Jesus, remember me** when You come **in Your kingdom!**” ⁴³ And He said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in **Paradise.**”

This morning we are going to think about the heart of the gospel we believe. It is the cross and I am taking you to Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, in Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified. Let’s begin with a little bit understanding of cross.

Cross:

- The Oxford Advanced American Dictionary defines the cross as follows: “a long vertical piece of wood with a shorter piece across it near the top. In the past people were hung on crosses and left to die as a punishment.”
- Cross was the Roman way of execution of the Gentile felons. The Roman citizens were never subject to the cross due to its cruelty (E.g. Apostle Paul the Roman citizen was beheaded when Apostle Peter was crucified upside down).
- Crucifixion was commonly practiced in Palestine at the time of Jesus.

- Imagine that you are a movie director. You want to show the crucifixion to the viewers. First, you roll the camera and zoom in on the three crosses and the surroundings: Jesus first, two criminals, religious leaders and crowd (bystanders), Roman soldiers, and Christ's disciples and the women who followed Jesus to the end. Then, you show what's happening at the Place of Skull, known as Golgotha.

At the Cross:

- As you and I stand right next to the cross of Jesus, we see human depravity at its lowest. Here, many people, except Jesus and one criminal, demonstrate how low we humans can get in our sinful nature. Here are the examples.
- 1) Greed (v. 34): While on the cross three people were groaning and mourning in pain, at the foot of the cross, we see the Roman soldiers so callous about human dignity to cover the body. They were casting lots to win Jesus' garments which were already blood-stained. My heart cries out loud, "Don't you care?! Please, leave Him alone!" Ignoring the basic human needs to be covered in public, the cold and uncaring soldiers were busy casting lots to get the free clothing. E.g. Battlefield looting by soldiers is not uncommon.
- 2) Cruelty/Insensitivity/Callousness to suffering (v. 35): The rulers (that is, religious leaders) along with the bystanders made fun of Jesus the Crucified. They actually sneered at Jesus who was in excruciating pain, saying: "Ha, look at you! You deserve to die this way! If you truly are who you claim to be, then prove it! Let's see if you can get out of this pain and suffering by yourself!" Cruelty at its peak.
- 3) No shame/Rudeness/Selfishness (v. 39): then, we see one of the criminals hanging on the cross. He seemed to have no sense of shame and guilt of his past crime that culminated in the cross, the capital punishment. He hurled insults at Jesus (literally, **blasphemed** Jesus, the strongest insult) whom he had never met before. Speaking of rudeness at its height! A normal person just doesn't show such disrespect even to a complete stranger (E.g. A killer in Ohio school shooting cursed the victims' families at court). All he cared about was to get himself out of the crucifixion taking advantage of the mighty power of Christ. I call it a shame and a selfishness.
- Then, I notice one thing in common among all these people.

One Thing in Common:

- In a united fashion, as if they had an agreement beforehand, they all demanded Jesus to come down from the cross. Taking turns, they sneered at Him saying, “**Save yourself!**” In verse 35,
- The Rulers/bystanders said: “He saved others; let Him **save Himself** if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One” (v. 35). In verse 37,
- The Roman Soldiers: Mocked Jesus, saying, “If You are the King of the Jews, **save Yourself**” (v. 37). In verse 39,
- The criminal: Hurling abuse at Jesus and said, “Are you not the Christ? **Save Yourself and us!**” (v. 39). Save yourself, save yourself, save yourself. We hear the same sentence echoing at the Place of Skull.

Question:

- Why didn’t Jesus save Himself as they had demanded? Was it too hard for Him to come down from the cross? No. Not at all. Why, then, wouldn’t He save Himself from the Cross to put all His mockers to shame? In fact, if I were Him, I would’ve saved myself and immediately struck them to death with thunder and lightning from heaven right there and then! Well, Jesus didn’t (thank God). Why? The answer is found in the words of the criminal who blasphemed Jesus.
- Notice here in v. 39: The one criminal said to Jesus, “**save yourself and save us!**” Jesus wouldn’t save Himself because He wanted to save others! God’s plan for saving humanity is not for “both.” It is, rather, “either.” In other words, to save all the other sinners, Jesus wouldn’t save Himself. God sent Jesus to the cross to save others. To redeem them from their sins. By saving Himself, He would’ve derailed God’s salvation plan for humanity. Christ bore the sin of the world and went to the cross to pay the wages of our sins through His own death.
- Listen to what the Scriptures say about this: *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Romans 6:23). We all die once and will face judgment before God (Hebrews 9:27). At the judgment seat, we are to pay the wages of our sins, and yet, God, in His everlasting grace and mercy, let Christ Jesus pay the wages on our behalf. The debt is paid, so we go free. As a result, we rest in the everlasting truth of Atonement: Christ died for us all. His death means our eternal salvation. His own salvation would’ve meant the eternal death for all.

God’s plan in Christ:

- Let me tell one more time about God’s blueprint for our salvation. First, Christ appears in due time, suffers, and dies on our behalf so that we may go free from the eternal punishment (Isaiah 53). It is called Atonement. Next, the same Christ rises from the dead to give us a hope that we too will be resurrected and be in the presence of God forever.
- At the cross, that first part of God’s plan was to about to be fulfilled. Christ wouldn’t mess up such an essential work of God for the sake of His pride: let humans sneer at Me; let them insult Me in every possible way; yet, God’s salvation plan must go on as planned, as prophesied in the Scriptures. Thank God that Christ never caved in to the mocking demands from the people around Him. Had He succumbed to the temptation to descend from the cross, the entire salvation plan would’ve been jeopardized, and you and I still would’ve lived in sin with no hope of eternal life. That’s why He stayed on the cross.
- In fact, that was Satan’s last-minute effort to abort God’s salvation. Through the mouths of those people, he repeatedly crying out to Jesus, “Save yourself so that you won’t save others!” Thank God, Jesus didn’t fall for the temptation. Sadly, though, all those folks missed their salvation opportunity by misunderstanding and mistreating Jesus the very Savior they needed the most.
- Ah. I want to end my message with a good note. Let’s listen to the one criminal who correctly understood who Jesus was. He ended up receiving a perfect gift from Jesus at his death—the eternal life. Let’s think about him now.

The Criminal Who Believed:

- At the cross the man truly pointed out to three characteristics of salvation: the sinful man, the sinless Savior, and the faith that connects the two. Here’s why I believe so:
- First, in his most painful moment, he never lost his sense of morality. He knew what was right and what was wrong. He acknowledged his sinfulness that deserved the death on the cross.
- Next, he demonstrated his faith in Jesus. He must have heard about Christ before they actually met each other at the Place of Skull. This man summed up well his understanding of self and Jesus as follows: *For we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong* (v. 41). He acknowledged that **he was a sinner, but Jesus was not**. God must have enlightened him for such a knowledge and understanding of Christ. E.g. Like Peter possessed the divine knowledge of Jesus the Messiah and the Son of the Living God (Matthew 16:16).

- Lastly, after the acknowledgement of his need of salvation from the sinless Savior, he moved on to confess **his faith** in Christ, saying, “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!” (v. 42). “Jesus, remember me”--- a humble plea made he to Jesus: *Have mercy on me.* To such a man of faith, Jesus replied, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise” (v. 43).

Cross: the Heart of the Gospel

- This is the heart of the gospel of Christ: The sinners need the sinless Christ who dies on their behalf and grants salvation and forgiveness. And, the sinners receive eternal life, the gift of God, through their faith in Jesus. And, together with Him, they will be in Paradise.
- Claim God’s promise for you today: Whoever calls the name of the Lord, whoever believes in the name of Jesus, will be saved: ⁸*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God;* ⁹*not as a result of works, so that no one may boast* (Ephesians 2:8-9). If you accept Jesus the Savior into your heart today, you too will be with Him in Paradise.
- Amen.