

Seven Words: Word of Assurance Luke 23:39-43

Introduction

Rome did not originate the concept of crucifixion, but they were ones to perfect it. Under Roman rule, crucifixion became an art form. In many ways, it was a day like every other day. Roman executions were not uncommon. In 4 B.C., the approximate year that Jesus was born, records show that the Romans crucified 2,000 people. That works out to be about six per day.

So cruel was this form of capital punishment that Rome rarely used it on its own citizens. It was instead reserved for really bad people. People like slaves, disgraced soldiers and especially political activists. That means, the so-called "legal" reason Jesus was crucified because He was guilty of instigating a political rebellion against Rome, on a par with zealots and other political activists."

A placard was hung over the head of the crucified one to identify the charge for which he was dying. The one over Jesus's head read "The king of the Jews."

We don't know why the other two men in this story were being crucified that day. Luke's gospel refers to them as criminals. Matthew's gospel calls them "robbers." Whatever their crime, it would have been displayed on the cross for all to have seen. And whatever their crime, it was obviously deed bad enough to merit the crucifixion death penalty.

The early church created quite a legend about this thief that makes for interesting reading. As the story goes ...

This man's name was Demas (or something similar to that). He was a type of Judean Robin Hood who robbed from the rich to give to the poor. According to the legend, when angel warned Joseph that Herod was trying to kill the baby Jesus, as the Holy Family was fleeing to Egypt, they were accosted by a band of robbers. The leader of this group intervened because he saw that the baby Jesus was so lovely he could not bear the thought of hurting him.

In fact, the legend says, this robber looked into the face of Jesus and said, "O blessed child, if there ever comes a time for having mercy on my, then remember me and forget not this hour." It was that man who was on this day the repentant sinner being crucified next to Jesus at Calvary.

It is doubtful there is even one ounce of possibility this could be a true story. It does, however, show that even the earliest Christians wondered why these two men would have totally different attitudes toward Jesus.

#1: BOTH HAD ACCESS; ONE TOOK ADVANTAGE

In verses we read last Thursday, we learned:

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. (Luke 23:32-33)

It appears that every detail of their individual stories is nearly the same.

- Both were criminals.
- Both were executed on the same day.
- Both were hanging right next to Savior of the world.
- Both engaged Jesus in conversation.
- Both knew of his reputation.

Access was not the issue. And it is not the issue for any person. The Scriptures make it clear that God reveals Himself to all people in every generation and in every situation.

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world. (Psalm 19:1-5)

And again:

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. (Romans 1:20)

But even more importantly:

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

Access is never the issue. So what is?

#2: BOTH SPOKE; ONE SOUGHT MERCY

One of them remained defiant to the end; one was broken by what he was experiencing, and knew he needed a Savior. You see that contrast in the very words they spoke to Jesus that day

The defiant one said:

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" (Luke 23:39)

My personal sense is that this was indeed a bad man. He had done wrong, and would do it again given the chance.

The repentant one, on the other hand, spoke in a softer tone:

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. (Luke 23:42)

While the first thief had a heart of stone, this second thief had a heart filled with remorse.

- They both saw Jesus, but only one saw a Savior.
- They both spoke to Jesus, but only one asked for mercy.

The writer of Ephesians proclaims:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions... (Ephesians 2:4)

You probably are aware of my love for the great hymns of the church. One of these, titled "There is a Fountain" describes this moment in tonight's text:

There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel's veins;
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains:
Lose all their guilty stains,
Lose all their guilty stains;
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.

The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day;
And there may I, though vile as he,
Wash all my sins away:
Wash all my sins away,
Wash all my sins away;
And there may I, though vile as he,
Wash all my sins away.

#3: BOTH DIED; ONE HAD ASSURANCE

In response to the thief's request, Jesus offered these words of assurance:

Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise. (Luke 23:43)

The thief had only asked to be remembered:

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. (Luke 23:42)

What a day it was for him!

- It began with a declaration of guilt.
- It concluded with the assurance of a home in heaven.

The word “paradise” is a Persian word meaning “A walled garden.” When a Persian king wanted to give one of his subjects a special honor, he invited him to walk with him in the garden; that is; to be with him in paradise.

- The word is only used twice in the New Testament. Both times it refers to being in the presence of God Himself.
- I think it is totally appropriate to think of this as heaven.

APPLICATION

Don't get too hung up on where paradise actually is. If you do, you will miss the point that this man died with the full assurance that his sins were forgiven. He was guilty, no doubt of that. He himself admitted as much there on the cross. But he died knowing that he would be in the presence of God for all of eternity.

Above everything else, this story should also reassure us of several things:

1. No one is too bad

Remember, the cross was reserved the worst of the worst. Sinners didn't come any more sinful than these two men crucified with Jesus. Yet the mercy of God was extended.

Let us never miss an opportunity to share the good news with someone we think is beyond hope!

2. It is never too late

If ever there was a death bed conversion, this was it. We can never think that it is too late for anyone, so we keep praying and keep sharing our faith.

One commentator I read quoted this line from a poem. It's about an evil man who died from being thrown from a galloping horse:

 Betwixt the stirrup and the ground,
 Mercy he sought, and mercy he found.

The assurance of heaven is for every person who comes to Jesus with a repentant heart, seeking His mercy – whether that is in the prime of life or at the very end. The Scriptures are clear:

And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1 John 5:11-12)

Amen.