

## A NEW BEGINNING AT THE LAST MINUTE

### Luke 23:39-43

Jesus was on the cross. It is the main event of the Christian faith. Christ is the central figure of history. The cross is the central factor of history. On Good Friday, Jesus died on the cross as a substitutionary sacrifice for sin. But Jesus was not the only person crucified on that hill that day. There were three crosses at Calvary. Jesus was crucified between two thieves. The Gospels tell us very little about these two thieves. We do not know their identities. We do not know their personal stories, family background, or criminal history. We do not know the crime for which they were crucified.

What scripture does tell us about them is all-important. First, both thieves were guilty of the crimes for which they were sentenced. In verse 41, one thief says to the other, "We are receiving the due reward of our deeds." Likewise, both thieves appealed to Jesus for help in their dying hour. Only one criminal received what he requested. In verse 43, Jesus said to the second thief, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

This is an emphatic denial of the false teaching call Universalism. Universalists believe every person will go to heaven, one way or another. But in **Matthew 25:46**, Jesus says, "And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Eternal punishment is just as long as eternal life. Every person will spend eternity somewhere. Your eternal destiny is determined by your response to the crucified Savior. In **John 14:6**, Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." This is the unapologetic claim of Jesus. Some do not think God would be so unloving to only provide one way to him. But they fail to recognize how a loving God is to provide any way at all for sinners to be forgiven. The blood and righteousness of Christ provides a new and living way to God. The total-sufficiency of the Lord Jesus Christ is seen in the final verdict for two guilty criminals. What happened to the criminals who were crucified with Jesus?

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### I. ONE CRIMINAL WENT TO HELL.

Verse 39 says, "One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" This criminal appealed to Jesus for help in his dying hour. His request was denied. Jesus spoke to the criminal on the other side of him. But he did not say anything to this thief. Jesus' non-response to this thief's request is a warning about playing church. You can see Jesus and still go to hell. You can meet Jesus and still go to hell. You can talk to Jesus and still go to hell. In **Matthew 7:21-23**, Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

## Why was this first thief's appeal denied?

### A. HE HAD THE WRONG VIEW OF HIMSELF.

The tragedy of the cross was threefold. There was the physical suffering of Jesus. There was the spiritual agony of Jesus. There was the personal humiliation of Jesus. As we focus on the suffering Jesus endured for our atonement, we neglect the humiliation of the crucifixion. Jesus was abused, tortured, and ridiculed before he was hung on the cross. It continued after he was hung on the cross. The first thief joined in. Verse 39 says he "railed at him." This is the graphic nature of human depravity. This thief was crucified for his crimes. But he never acknowledged his wrongdoings. He was a guilty sinner dying on a cross and facing eternal damnation. Yet he joined the crowd and mocked Jesus on the cross. You can miss heaven by following the crowd. **Matthew 7:13-14** says: "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." Likewise, you can miss heaven, if you point the finger at others and never come to grips with your own guilt. **Romans 3:23** indicts us all: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

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### B. HE HAD THE WRONG VIEW OF JESUS.

HE MISUNDERSTOOD THE PERSON OF CHRIST. In verse 39, the thief asked, "Are you not the Christ?" This rhetorical question dripped with sarcasm. At best, he thought Jesus was a messiah wannabe, condemned for making terrorists threats. At worse, he thought Jesus was a criminal like him, who got what he deserved. This is the irony of the cross. He who was mocked as king was the King. But this thief thought it was all a joke.

HE MISUNDERSTOOD THE WORK OF CHRIST. In verse 39, the thief says, "Save yourself and us!" See the humiliation of Christ. This foul-mouthed criminal barked orders to the sin-bearing Savior. He did not understand the nature of Christ' saving work. When this thief called on Jesus, he wanted escape, not forgiveness. He wanted deliverance, not conversion. He wanted to get off the cross, not go to heaven. Too many people come to Jesus for escape, not conversion. But health, wealth, success, prominence, and happiness cannot save your soul. In **Matthew 16:26**, Jesus asks, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?"

Likewise, he did not understand the necessity of Christ's saving work. This mock command was a theological impossibility. Jesus could not save himself and save him also. **Luke 24:35** says: "And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" "Christ crucified" was a contradiction in terms to them. At this point, this thief and the religious leaders were in full agreement. He said, "Save yourself and us!" But Jesus could not save others, if he saved himself. The King had to die to save us! **John 3:14-16** says: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

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## II. ONE CRIMINAL WENT TO HEAVEN.

There were three crosses on the hill that day – the cross of redemption, the cross of rejection, and the cross of reception. One man died for sin. One man died in sin. One man died to sin. **PHILLIP GRAHAM RYKEN** wrote: “The thief on the cross had to be the luckiest man alive. He was nothing more than a low-life criminal, a loser. He had committed a crime. He was convicted for it, and he was crucified for it. So he had no future; he was going nowhere; or worse, he was going to hell. Yet of all the criminals, on all the crosses, on all the hills in the Roman Empire, he was crucified next to Jesus.” Because of the man in the middle, this guilty criminal experienced a new beginning at the last minute.

Never give up on God. Sovereign grace can use the worst of circumstances for your spiritual benefit. **Romans 8:28** says, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Because God is God, what looks like the end may be a divine set up for a new beginning. Likewise, never give up on any person. Imagine this second thief was from a broken home, dropped out of school, and had a long criminal history. Everyone had written him off a long time ago. But God orchestrated the details of his life, so he would be nailed to a cross next to Jesus and be saved in his dying hour. This second criminal was saved on the cross because he recognized that he was a great sinner and Jesus was a great Savior.

### A. HE RECOGNIZED THAT HE WAS A GREAT SINNER.

The angry crowd, religious leaders, and Roman soldiers mocked Jesus, as he hung on the cross. **Matthew 27:44** says: “And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.” During the crucifixion, both criminals mocked Jesus. But at some point, the second thief changed his mind. More specifically, sovereign grace changed his heart. He stopped mocking Jesus. Then he tried to stop the other thief from mocking Jesus. In verses 40-41, he rebuked him saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving our due reward for our deeds; but this man has done no wrong.”

In watching Jesus die, this thief came to grips with his own guilt. He acknowledged he was getting what he deserved. This is not easy to do. The other thief on the cross could not do it. Can you? It is the difference between life and death, salvation and judgment, heaven and hell. You must confess your sins to be saved. A king visited a prison. During his visit, he promised to set one prisoner free. As he interviewed the prisoners, each one appealed to the king on the basis of their innocence. One prisoner acknowledged his guilt and confessed his crimes. The king said, “Release this guilty man immediately, lest he contaminate all of these innocent prisoners!” Unconfessed sin is imprisonment to guilt. **1 John 1:8-9** says: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

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## B. HE RECOGNIZED THAT JESUS IS A GREAT SAVIOR.

In verse 41, the softened thief said to the hardened thief, “We are receiving the due reward of our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” As this thief acknowledge his guilt, he also acknowledged the innocence of Jesus. He was no criminal. Moreover, he was no sinner. Jesus died with the sins of the world on him. But there was no sin in him. **2 Corinthians 5:21** says, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” At the cross, God treated Jesus as if he had committed all of our sins, so that by faith in him, God might treat us as if we have performed all of the righteousness of Christ. After rebuking his fellow criminal, verse 42 records what he said to the Lord: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

HE CALLED THE RIGHT NAME. The thief cried out, “Jesus.” This is one of the rare places in the Gospels where Jesus is addressed without some honorific title. But it was the right name to call for salvation. In **Matthew 1:21**, the angel told Joseph concerning Mary, “She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” In **Acts 4:12**, Peter proclaimed, “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” In **Roman 10:13**, Paul declares, “For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

HE SAW THE RIGHT VISION. He said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” This is arguably the greatest statement of saving-faith in the Bible. The disciples believed Jesus was the Messiah of Israel who had come to establish the kingdom of God. But Judas betrayed him, Peter denied him, and the others deserted him. Yet when Jesus looked least like a king, this thief saw that Jesus would reign as king. What do you see, when you see Jesus? The crucified Savior is the resurrected King! **Romans 10:9** says: “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

HE MADE THE RIGHT REQUEST. In verse 42, the thief prayed, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” This thief did not ask to be rescued from the cross. He asked to be remembered beyond the cross. It was a simple plea for mercy. Guilty sinners receive new life by a divine act of sparing mercy. **Ephesians 2:4-5** say: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved.”

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Verse 42 records the criminal’s appeal. Verse 43 records the judge’s acquittal: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

JESUS SAVES SIMPLY. The word “today” is emphatic. This penitent thief was saved immediately. Without baptism, confirmation, church membership, ministry participation, or tithes and offerings, Jesus said, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” The Philippian jailor asked, “What must I do to be saved.” In **Acts 16:31**, Paul and Silas answered, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” You can be saved today! It’s as simple as A-B-C. A – Admit to God you are a sinner. B – Believe that Jesus died for your sins and rose from the dead. C – Confess Jesus as your Savior and Lord. It’s that simple.

JESUS SAVES COMPLETELY. **Hebrews 7:25** says, “Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” Jesus is mighty to save. So mighty is our Savior that he saved a dying man as he himself died on the cross. Jesus told the thief, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” The thief was not sent to purgatory to pay for his sins and fix him for heaven. On that very day, he would be with Jesus in paradise. The word “paradise” means a garden. In the ancient world, it was a great honor to be invited to join the king in his royal garden. Theologically, paradise is the restoration of the Garden of Eden. We got in trouble in a garden. But we got out of trouble in a garden. We got in trouble with a tree. But we got out of trouble with a tree. We got in trouble with a woman named Eve. But we got out of trouble with a woman named Mary. We got into trouble with a man named Adam. But we got out of trouble with a man named Jesus.

THERE IS A FOUNTAIN FILLED WITH BLOOD, DRAWN FROM EMMANUEL’S VEINS  
AND SINNERS PLUNGED BENEATH THAT FLOOD, LOSE ALL THEIR GUILTY STAINS

THE DYING THIEF REJOICED TO SEE THAT FOUNTAIN IN HIS DAY  
AND THERE HAVE I, THOUGH VILE AS HE, WASHED ALL MY SINS AWAY

JESUS SAVES ETERNALLY. Jesus said, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” No one ever had a day like this thief. At daybreak, he was on death row, awaiting execution. At midday, he was hanging on a cross. At sundown, he was with Jesus in heaven. When God grips you by his grace, he will never let you go. In Christ you are eternally secure. Jesus saves forever! **John 10:28-30** says: “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” Jesus saves simply, completely, and eternally because he did not stay dead. He died on the cross. They put him in Joseph’s new tomb. But early Sunday morning, God raised him from the dead with all power in his hand! **1 Corinthians 15:56-57** says: “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

**October 2, 2004, 17-year-old Laura Hatch went to a local party, but did not make it home. Her parents notified the authorities the next morning. But the police were slow, thinking Laura ran away from home. Her parents knew better. They organized volunteers to search for Laura throughout Seattle. They organized a prayer meeting in their church. After leaving that prayer meeting, a mother of one of Laura’s girlfriends kept having vivid dreams of a wooded area. The next morning, she put her daughter in the car. She said she kept hearing a voice saying, “Keep going.” Finally, she heard the voice say, “Stop.” Looking over the embankment, she saw the Toyota Camry Laura had been driving 150 feet below. When they reached Laura, she was so disillusioned, she thought she had been in the car a few hours, not eight days. A first responder said she should have died of dehydration after eight days without water. When they examined her at the hospital, they found a blood clot that should have killed her. But because she was dehydrated, the clot was not able to spread. What should have killed her saved her life.**