

Luke 23:26-49 Jesus Saves Others by Not Saving Himself, part 2 (vss. 39-49)

A class hated for their abominations [is] called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judæa, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome....

So wrote the Roman historian Tacitus in 116 AD. This record is one of the earliest non-Christian references to the origins of Christianity and to the execution of Christ by the Romans. Most historians believe Tacitus' account to be an authentic confirmation of the crucifixion of Christ. Even skeptics and critics have to admit that the Romans crucified Jesus.

We didn't need Tacitus' account to know about Jesus' crucifixion, but it is helpful to know that there is solid historical evidence proving that Jesus "suffered the extreme penalty" under Pontius Pilate. In the Gospel accounts, we have four separate but very similar records of Jesus' crucifixion. What we have before us is some of the most well-verified historical information from the ancient world.

This is part 2 of a message I started two weeks ago. Last time we considered Jesus on the way to the cross. Simon of Cyrene had carried the cross part of the way to Calvary. Jesus spoke to the mourners and revealed to them that they would soon be suffering a great disaster themselves. Then we looked at how Luke described the crucifixion. The soldiers took Jesus outside the city walls to a place called Calvary and crucified him along with two criminals. As the soldiers were gambling for his clothes and as the Jewish leaders were mocking him, Jesus asked God to forgive them. And the last thing we mentioned was that Pilate ordered a placard to be affixed to the cross above Jesus' head with the words "This is Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews."

Let's keep going in the text and see how Jesus saved others by not saving himself.

I. The two criminals .39-43 “malefactor” = evil doer

- A. It’s impossible to say what crime these criminals had committed, but it must have been quite serious. These were probably dangerous and violent men. The other Gospel accounts say that they were thieves.

Crucifixion was [normally] reserved for the worst criminals [and slaves]; by law a Roman citizen could not be crucified.¹

We can hardly imagine the pain and suffering the victim would endure. Crucifixion was usually a long, slow, brutal process. Victims often suffered on the cross for several days before finally succumbing to death, often by asphyxiation. It was a terrible way to die.

- B. .39 One of the criminals “railed on him.”

This man was just one of many who verbally abused Jesus during the crucifixion.

Note vs. 35 the *rulers* “derided, (ἐκμυκτηρίζω—sneer, turn up the nose), vs. 36 the *soldiers* “mocked” (ἐμπαίζω—make sport/fun of), vs. 39 the *criminal* “railed on” (βλασφημέω—slander, speak evil of). So along with the physical pain was intense verbal abuse.

- C. .40-42 The other criminal responded differently. Notice what the man did:

1. .40 He rebuked the other criminal.

Note the words “Dost not thou fear God...?” Perhaps the prospect of standing before God in judgment focused this man’s mind on his eternal destiny.

For the unsaved, the prospect of facing God in judgment should be a fearful thing (cf. Heb 10:31). Many people today don’t have a fear of God because they don’t have an accurate, biblical understanding of God. They think of God in terms only of love and grace, not in terms of holiness, justice, and righteousness.

If we understand the Bible, we should have a robust fear of God. The whole duty of man is to fear God and keep his commandments. The fear of God ought to motivate sinners to repent and to trust in Christ.

¹ John A. Martin, “Luke,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 262.

On the other hand, for Christians, there is no fear of judgment.
cf. Rom 8:1

2. .41 He admitted his own guilt. He and the other man were being punished for their crimes, and rightfully so. The man confessed his sin.

App: In order to be saved, you must admit your own sin. Repentance begins with admitting that you are a sinner in need of a savior.

Repentance is a change of mind about sin and self. To repent is to turn from sin toward God. If you fail to repent, you cannot be saved. This man confessed his sin and repented.

3. .41b He stated his belief that Jesus was innocent. Pilate said the same thing multiple times, Herod said it, and this criminal said it. After Jesus' death, the centurion will say it. Jesus' innocence is a main theme of this passage.
4. .42 He confessed his trust in Jesus. The man simply and humbly asked Jesus to remember him when he came in his kingdom. I.e., he asked to be included in Jesus' coming kingdom. That's a good example of faith like a mustard seed—it's very small, but it's real.

And the man's faith is quite extraordinary as well. Here's a dying criminal putting his trust in another dying criminal. From all appearances, Jesus could not save himself. At this point, Jesus didn't look like he could save anyone. To believe that a man hanging on a cross would bring in a kingdom is quite a leap of faith; but that's what he does.

Quote: This criminal ... is the first to recognize that Jesus' death is not a contradiction of his messiahship, his role as Savior; he is the first to recognize that Jesus' crucifixion is a precursor to his enthronement (cf. Acts 5:30–31), and thus he anticipates in his request Jesus' kingly rule.²

² Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 822–823.

It's another example of an outsider/outcast who recognizes who Jesus really is while the Jewish leaders fail to recognize who he is. The outsider/outcast is saved, while the insiders—those who should have known better—are lost.

It's often religious people who don't realize that they are lost. People like this thief are well aware of their sinful condition. Good, nice, decent people often don't think they need to be saved. They fail to understand their true condition—lost and condemned.

App: This criminal doesn't look like the average prospect for conversion, but given certain circumstances, he repents and believes in Jesus.

Likewise, we never know that factors that may be in play in the lives of those we are witnessing to. They may seem like unlikely converts, but you never know how someone might respond when you present the Gospel. You never know what events might be having an influence that would lead the person to believe.

The other criminal persisted in his scornful unbelief. But this man turned to Christ in faith. We trust that when we present the Gospel to others, some will believe. No one is beyond the reach of the Gospel. Some will scoff and scorn, but some will believe.

Our job is not to manipulate anyone into the faith. Our job is to present the Gospel and trust that God will call his sheep to himself.

5. So this is the record of the man's conversion—he repented of his sin and he put his faith in Jesus to save him.

D. .43 Jesus assured the man that he would be with him in Paradise later that same day. The criminal asked Jesus to remember him at some point in the future, but Jesus assures him that “today” the man would be with Jesus in Paradise, i.e., in heaven. Jesus assured the man that he would both die and enter heaven that very day.

In many cases, people suffering crucifixion would endure on the cross for three or four days. Jesus assurance that “today” they would be together in Paradise was no doubt very welcome news for the man.

And BTW, there is no hint here of limbo or purgatory; there's no halfway house between heaven and hell. If anyone deserved to spend some time in purgatory before going to heaven, it was this man. But Jesus assured him he'd be with him in heaven that day.

When you die, you go to heaven or hell. Immediately upon death, you go to glory or you go to the devil. If you don't make a reservation in heaven, you'll have one automatically in hell.

- E. Even while suffering the agonies of the cross, Jesus still was seeking the lost, still offering hope and salvation to those who trust in him. He was still proving himself to be the friend of sinners (Mt 11:19). Instead of saving himself, he's saving others.

Quote: Tax collectors, prostitutes, the poor, the blind, and even criminals being executed for their crimes are able in the eleventh hour to find in Jesus an all-sufficient Savior.³

App: The thief on the cross shows us a number of important things. *First*, he shows us that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, not by good works. The man did nothing to earn any credit for himself. All he did was acknowledge his sin and express his faith in Jesus. *Second*, he shows that up until the point of death, it's never too late to be saved. This man is minutes away from his death when he is converted. *Third*, he shows that even a deeply sinful person can be saved. And *fourth*, he shows that upon a believer's death, he is immediately with the Lord in heaven.

What a great promise Jesus gave this man —“Today you will be with me...”

Maybe someone here today needs to do what the thief on the cross did—turn from your sin and put your faith in Jesus. That's the only way you can be assured of eternal life. Even if you are deeply sinful like this criminal, you can still be saved. Jesus offers forgiveness and an eternal home in heaven to anyone who will repent of sin and trust in him.

³ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 593.

II. The death of Jesus .44-49

We now come to the culmination of this account—Jesus’ death. Luke does not give us all the grisly details leading to Jesus’ death. But he does tell us some remarkable things that happened when Jesus died.

- A. .44-45 Darkness covered the land and the veil of the temple ripped in half.

Both of these are miraculous, supernatural, unusual occurrences. And both have deep symbolic significance.

1. .45 “the sun was darkened.” The darkness occurred from “the sixth hour” (i.e., noon) to “the ninth hour” (i.e., 3 pm), normally the brightest part of the day. So this was not merely a heavy fog or thick clouds. This darkness descended *because of* Jesus’ death.

Sinful man is putting the Creator to death. Darkness symbolizes sin and judgment. God is pouring out his wrath on Jesus. He was suffering God’s judgment against sin on our behalf. As the Son of God dies, the sun in the sky is darkened in response. Creation itself responds to the Creator’s death.

2. .45b The veil of the temple ripped. This veil was the thick curtain that hung between the holy place and the holy of holies. That curtain always separated sinful man from the presence of God. The other Gospel accounts tell us the curtain ripped from top to bottom.

The tearing of that veil symbolized very important truths. *First*, it showed that through Christ, believers have access directly to God. A priest no longer stands between God and man. We have direct access into the presence of God. *Second*, it showed that the OT sacrificial system had come to an end. The death and resurrection of Christ produced a monumental change in the way that sinners approach God. Jesus’ final, perfect sacrifice ended the OT sacrificial system. And *third*, it showed God’s judgment on the Jewish people for their failure to accept Jesus, their Messiah. The ripped veil shows God’s displeasure with the Jewish people. As Jesus had said previously, their “house,” that is, the temple, was left unto them “desolate” (Lk 13:35).

These two highly symbolic events—darkness falling and the veil tearing—show that Jesus’ death is very significant. Both of them reveal God’s judgment against the nation.

- B. .46 Jesus cried out, commended himself to God, and died.
1. When he said “into thy hands I commend my spirit,” he was quoting from Psalm 31:5. In that passage, the psalmist entrusts himself to God’s care. Jesus does the same by using these words. These were his very last words on the cross. So Jesus died with the words of Scripture on his tongue.
 2. He “gave up the ghost.” This single word in the original language (ἐξέπνευσεν) means “to breath out. To “give up the ghost” means “to die.” Jesus breathed his last breath; he quit breathing and died.
 3. Even in death, Jesus was in control. His life was not taken from him; he gave up his life voluntarily (Jn 10:18). He laid it down of his own will.
- C. .47 A centurion stated that Jesus was a righteous man.
1. This soldier was probably in charge of crucifying Jesus. Perhaps he was the overseer of the executioners. He had no doubt put many people to death, so for him to say something like this is quite remarkable.
 2. By saying that Jesus was a righteous man, he is agreeing with Pilate and Herod that Jesus had done nothing wrong and did not deserve to die.
 3. Matthew records the man saying “Truly, this was the Son of God” (Mt 27:54). The centurion had seen and heard some unusual things associated with Jesus’ death, and he concluded that Jesus was no ordinary criminal. He was a righteous man, indeed, the Son of God.
- D. .48 The people expressed their grief.
1. We get the sense that there is a fairly large crowd viewing this event—“all the people, “all his acquaintance, and the women...”
 2. “smote their breasts” – some of the people recognize the horror of what has happened and grieve passionately.
- E. .49 Some of Jesus’ followers watched the event from a distance.
1. We know that John, Jesus’ mother, and a few others were at the foot of the cross.

2. Others were watching events unfold from a distance. This group probably included some of the disciples and other friends.
3. Even this seems to fulfill a prophetic expectation:
Psalm 38:11 My loved ones and my friends stand aloof ..., And my relatives stand afar off.

Thus ends the earthly, physical life of Jesus. From all appearances, Jesus had failed to fulfill his promises. He claimed to be the Messiah, the son of God, yet had been executed by the Romans at the insistence of the Jews. A crucified Messiah—that simply did not make any sense to the Jewish mind. After the death of Jesus, his followers would no doubt return to their former lives, and the idea of Jesus being the Messiah and savior would fade into obscurity.

So one would think and expect. But, of course, we know the rest of the story. Jesus died on the cross, but that was not the end of Jesus, nor was it the end of the movement Jesus started.

The thief on the cross believed in Jesus just minutes before it was too late. Jesus saved him by not saving himself. The Bible says, “Today is the day of salvation.” What is stopping you from turning from your sin and trusting in Jesus? If you were to die today, do you have confidence that today you would be with Jesus in Paradise? If not, do what the thief on the cross did—repent of your sins and trust Jesus today. Only then can you have the assurance that when you die, you will immediately be with Jesus in Paradise.