

## **THE MAN ON THE MIDDLE CROSS** **(Luke 23:32-43)**

Wednesday morning, I sat down at my desk. I swiveled my chair to the right and pulled down a devotional book from the bookcase behind my desk. It is a devotional classic called *Streams in the Desert*. It was published back in 1924 and is still being published today. I turned to that day's date, March 29<sup>th</sup>. Listen to the words I read:

Many years ago, there was a monk who needed olive oil, so he planted an olive tree sapling. After he finished planting it, he prayed, "Lord, my tree needs rain so its tender roots may drink and grow. Send gentle showers." And the Lord sent gentle showers. Then the monk prayed, "Lord, my tree needs sun. Please send it sun." And the sun shone, gilding the once-dripping clouds. "Now send frost, dear Lord to strengthen its branches," cried the monk. And soon the little tree was covered in sparkling frost, but by evening it had died.

Then the monk sought out a brother monk . . . and told him of his strange experience. After hearing the story, the older monk said, "I also planted a little tree. See how it is thriving! But I entrust my tree to its God. He who made it knows better than a man like me what it needs. I gave God no constraints or conditions, except to pray, 'Lord, send what it needs—whether that be a storm or sunshine, wind, rain, or frost. You made it, and you know best what it needs.'"

Do you ever tell God what you need and then ask Him to give you what you think you need? That is a foolish practice. Fortunately, in His mercy and love, God often ignores those prayers and gives us instead what He knows we need.

On Wednesday, just before lunch, I read an article by Dave Goetz. He is a former pastor and author who often writes for *Christianity Today*. What he wrote dovetailed perfectly with what I had read earlier in the day. He noted how some church members leave their church because the church isn't meeting their needs. He wrote:

What I perceive to be my needs . . . may not correspond to my true spiritual needs. Often, in fact, I am not attuned to my true spiritual needs.

Thinking that I know my true spiritual needs is arrogant, narcissistic, and so American. Staying put as a life practice allows God's grace to work on the unsanded surfaces of my inner life.

Just as it is unwise for you to tell God what you need, it would be equally foolish of me to presume to preach to you what I think you need to hear.

Between the devotion I read on Wednesday morning and the article I read on Wednesday just before lunch, I read a sermon that clarified for me what my job is when I step behind this pulpit.

In a sermon entitled, "The Power and Message of the Cross," Alistair Begg announced to those who had gathered to hear him, "I should say that I have not arrived here to tell you something that you do not know, but rather that we would remind each

other of that which we must never forget.”

That’s it! Each time I open this Book to expound it, my goal is not to proclaim to you something you don’t know. My hope is to remind both you and myself of that which we must never forget.

Paul wrote these words to the Church in Corinth: “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). The Church in Corinth was Paul’s problem child. They had no shortage of difficulties. There was division, discord, cliques. There was immorality, arrogance, and immaturity. God made it clear that what His people needed to hear about is what Jesus did for them on the cross. That message was not new. It was not something they had never heard before, but it was the old, good news story that they and we must never forget.

Today and next Sunday, we are going to bypass our quick journey through John, and we are going to look at the Gospel According to Luke. One of the wonderful things about Luke is that he tells us details which the other writers do not, and these details often involve people. Luke introduces us to people we would not know about had he not written his account of the life and ministry of Jesus. Luke is the only non-Jewish author of the NT. Luke was an outsider, and he tells us about other outsiders who came to know the Savior.

All four gospels tell us that Jesus was crucified between two men. Luke refers to them as *criminals*. Both Matthew and Mark call them *robbers*. It was a word that meant “to ruthlessly use force to take the possessions of others.” These men were not petty thieves. They were violent offenders. Matthew and Mark also tell us that both of these robbers hurled insults at Jesus. They joined in with the religious leaders, the soldiers, and many from the crowd who mocked Jesus. Only Luke informs us of a conversation Jesus had with one of those men. Luke tells us the rest of the story.

Our text today is Luke 23:32-43. We are going to look at, “The Man on the Middle Cross.” I want you to remind you of three life-changing truths about Him.

### **The Man on the Middle Cross is a Man of Forgiveness**

Look again at v. 34. I am to get a bit technical with you by teaching you some Greek grammar. Stay with me here. Don’t check out. I promise, this will be worth it. The verb *said* is what is called an *aorist imperfect* verb. Aorist means past tense. Luke is looking back and tells us this is what Jesus said. What Jesus said took place in the past. *Imperfect* means repeated action in the past. That means this word *said* could be translated as, “Jesus kept saying” or “Jesus said again and again.” Picture this scene in your mind.”

- Jesus is laid on the ground atop the cross, and Jesus says, “Father, forgive them. They don’t know what they are doing.”
- Ropes are used to tied his arms to the cross beam, and Jesus cries out, “Father forgive them . . .”
- A large iron spike is driven through his wrist into the wood, first one wrist and then the other. Each time Jesus looks heavenward and prays, “Father, forgive

them. They don't know what they are doing.”

- They lay one foot atop the other and drive another spike through both feet into the wood of the vertical beam. And Jesus says, “Father, forgive them . . .”
- That cross is lifted up and dropped into the slender hole dug for it. As the weight of cross hits the bottom of the hole, flesh and tendons are torn, and Jesus cries out, “Father, forgive them . . .”

One man wrote, “How many times that prayer pierced heaven's blue that day, no one knows.”

In that one prayer that is prayed many times, we see the depth and width of Jesus' love and forgiveness. He prays for sinners as He dies for sinners.

A deaf-mute was once asked the meaning of forgiveness. He asked for a piece of paper. On it he wrote, “Forgiveness is the aroma a flower yields when trampled upon.”

As Jesus was trampled upon the cross, He gave off the fragrance of forgiveness.

In 1941 at Auschwitz, the Nazi death camp, he was known as Prisoner 16670. In 1982, Pope John Paul II declared him to be a Saint. His name was Maximilian Kolbe, and like the Pope who canonized him, he grew up in Poland where he became a priest. The monastery where Father Kolbe lived and worked was also a publishing house. Even though the Nazi army occupied Poland, and even though Kolbe had been arrested, interrogated, held for two and half months, and released, Kolbe continued to print anti-Nazi publications. In February of 1941, Kolbe was arrested again, along with four others. Soon afterwards, Kolbe was sent to Auschwitz.

While there, a prisoner escaped. In retaliation, the deputy camp commander chose ten men at random. He announced they would be starved to death in an underground bunker. One of the men cried out, “My wife! My children!” Kolbe stepped forward and said, “I am a Catholic priest. I want to die for that man; I am old; he has a wife and children.” Kolbe was only 47, but he has suffered from tuberculosis for two decades. The substitution was permitted.

Kolbe was stripped naked and placed in a dark cellar. After two weeks of being deprived of both food and water, six of the men had died, but Maximilian Kolbe and three others were still alive. He and the remaining ones were injected with a fatal poison.

The man for whom Kolbe died survived. He was freed by the Allies. He moved back to Poland after the war and lived to be 93. In 1994, the year before his death he came to the United States where he visited the St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic Church in Houston, Texas. Through an interpreter he said, “So long as I have breath in my lungs, I consider it my duty to tell people about the heroic act of love by Maximilian Kolbe.”

Do we have any less of a duty to tell others about the heroic love of the man on the middle cross who took our place and became our substitute?

The night before He died, Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). That is what Jesus did for us.

Why was it necessary that Jesus die? God is all-powerful. Couldn't He just wave His hand, “Everybody is forgiven.” We think God can do anything. The reality is that there are some things God cannot do. Let me give you a for instance. Look at vv. 35-36, 39. In

both Matthew and Mark's account, there were those in the crowd who looked up at Jesus and called upon Him to save Himself just as the soldiers did in our text and one of those criminals dying next to Him. Jesus had the power to do that. When the temple guards came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter drew his sword to defend Jesus. Jesus told Peter to put away his sword. He said in Matthew 26:53, "Do you think I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?"

We see here that Jesus, the Son of God, could not save both Himself and us. If He saved Himself, we would be damned. In order to save us, He had to die.

God is a holy and just God. His holiness and justice demand that sin be judged. Jesus bore God's wrath against sin so that we wouldn't have to ourselves. Ephesians 1:7 tells us, "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace."

The man on the middle cross is a man of forgiveness.

### **The Man on the Middle Cross is a Man Like No Other**

Maximilian Kolbe died to save another Polish man at Auschwitz in 1941. He saved him physically. In that terrible war there were millions who died to save the world from tyranny. It is possible for one man to save another in many ways. You can save a person's career. You can save a person's reputation. You can help a couple save their marriage from divorce or their farm from foreclosure, or their possessions from theft. One thing you cannot do is save another person's soul from God's judgment. A mere man, who is himself a sinner, cannot save another sinner.

The soldiers said, "If you are the King of the Jews . . ." As Jesus was dying on the cross, there was a sign above Him that read, "This is the King of the Jews." One of the criminals said in a mocking tone, "Are you not the Christ?" The title Christ means "the anointed one." The anointed one is the King.

The ironic thing is that the very one that Jesus was taunted as being was exactly the one who He in fact is. Jesus is the King. He is the Christ. There was and is something special about Jesus. He is like no other.

Jesus was fully man, but He was and is also fully God. Jesus did not come to be in Bethlehem. Jesus has always been. There was never a time when Jesus was not. He is eternally existent. When God the Father said, "Let us make man in our image," God the Son was right there as was God the Holy Spirit. We do not serve three Gods. There is One God, but our one God exists in three persons. Jesus took on human form at Bethlehem, but He has always been.

In addition to being God, Jesus was also sinless. That makes Him like no other. No one other than Jesus has gotten through this life without messing up, without thinking a sinful thought, without saying a sinful word, and without doing a sinful deed. That makes Jesus unique, and it also qualifies Jesus to be our sin-bearer. 1 Corinthians 5:21 assures us, "For our sake He (God the Father) made Him (God the Son) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus took what we

possessed, our sin, and gave us what He alone possessed, His righteousness.

It has been said that of the three who died that day, one died in his sin; one died to his sin, and one died for sin, sin not His own.

That brings us to the truth.

### **The Man on the Middle Cross is a Man who Alone Saves**

Look at the request and the reply found in vv. 42-43. Of all the conversion stories in the Bible, this may be the most amazing. According to Matthew and Mark, the criminal who called out to Jesus in faith, earlier had joined in with the others and with his partner in crime by mocking Jesus. But then, something happened. He heard Jesus speak. He watched as Jesus was dying. There was an uncommon peace that Jesus possessed. There was an uncommon love that Jesus expressed.

The Holy Spirit used what the man saw and heard, and the Spirit of God did a work of regeneration in that sinner's heart. He recognized that he was a sinner and that Jesus was who He claimed to be. He was the Messiah. He was the King. The man trusted Jesus.

Notice what Jesus said to him. The first word Jesus spoke is translated in my version as *truly*. The KJV says *verily*. The NLT puts it, "I assure you."

This criminal who is being executed for his crimes is given more assurance of his salvation than anybody else in Scripture. Jesus does not lay down any further conditions the man must meet. There are no maybe's, ifs, or coulds in what Jesus says. Jesus says, "Assuredly, today, you will be with Me in Paradise."

This thief's story may mess with your theology of conversion. Think about it. This man was not baptized. He did not go through confirmation. He never observed communion. He never joined a church or ever even attended a church. He never gave a dime to the Lord's work. He never said the sinner's prayer. He never personally led someone to the Lord.

He did the one thing that every saved person does and the one that Jesus eternally blesses. He believed on Jesus.

Years ago, I read that one thief was saved than none might despair but only one that none might presume.

I wish to close by verbally sharing something I have seen on Facebook a dozen times. It comes from the sermon I read last Wednesday. It was preached by Alistair Begg. Here is what he said about the thief on the cross who trusted Jesus:

I can't wait to find that fellow one day to ask him, "How did that shake out for you? Because you were cussing the guy out with your friend. You'd never been in a Bible study. You'd never got baptized. You didn't know a thing about church membership. And yet—and yet, you made it! You made it! How did you make it?"

That's what the angel must have said—you know, like, "What are you doing here?"

"Well, I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

“Well, ’cause I don’t know.”

“Well, you know... Excuse me. Let me get my supervisor.”

They go get the supervisor angel: “So, we’ve just a few questions for you. First of all, are you clear on the doctrine of justification by faith?”

The guy says, “I’ve never heard of it in my life.”

“And what about... Let’s just go to the doctrine of Scripture immediately.”

This guy’s just staring.

And eventually, in frustration, he says, “On what basis are you here?”

And he said, “The man on the middle cross said I can come.”

That’s it. Jesus invites us to come to Himself, and He invites us to come by faith. In the last book of the Bible—Revelation 3:20 we read these words of Jesus: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with Me.”

Is Jesus knocking on the door of your heart? By faith, open it, and let Him come in where He belong. Please understand this: Don’t invite Him to come in as your guest. Welcome Him as your Master of the house, as your Savior and Lord.

Jesus alone saves those who trust Him alone.