

The Death of the Innocent (Good Friday 2024)

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Date: 29 March 2024

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[0 : 00] This Good Friday evening, as we remember the sacrifice of your Son, please humble the pride of man and exalt the mercy of Christ.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. On Sundays, we normally ask you to stand for the reading of God's Word, but you've been standing a lot for the reading of Scripture, so I'm just going to read for us here.

Luke 23, verses 32 to 49. Two others who were criminals were led away to be put to death with Jesus.

And when they came to the place that is called the Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on His right and one on His left.

And Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. And they cast lots to divide His garments.

[1 : 13] 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.

The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up and offering Him sour wine and saying, If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself. There was also an inscription over Him, This is the King of the Jews.

One of the criminals who were hanged, railed at Him, saying, Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us. But the other 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 the due reward of our deeds. But this man has done nothing wrong.

And he said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And he said to him, Truly, I say to you, Today you will be with me in paradise.

[2 : 38] It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.

Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, Father, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. And having said this, he breathed his last.

Now, when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, Certainly this man was innocent. And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts.

And all his acquaintances and the woman who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things. This is God's holy and authoritative word.

Many of us in this city are accustomed to success. But what would you do if you're in a situation where, no matter how hard you try, you just are not good enough?

[3 : 55] Your best has always been enough. Until now. You have an impregnable wall to climb.

You have an impassable chasm to cross. You have an insurmountable debt to repay. What would you do?

When it comes to our spiritual life, that is the unfortunate situation that we all find ourselves in. We are guilty sinners before a holy God.

And our best is not good enough. But this passage teaches us that the good news of Good Friday is this, that innocent Jesus was unjustly condemned so that guilty sinners might be mercifully saved.

And we're going to look at how the innocent goes to the cross and then how the criminal goes to paradise. Throughout this book, Luke emphasizes the innocence of Jesus.

[5 : 07] In the narrative of Jesus' suffering and death in chapter 23, Luke tells us six times total that Jesus was in fact innocent. Three times, the governor, the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate himself,

makes this confession.

He says that he finds no guilt in Jesus. King Herod also concurs with him. And then in our passage tonight, one of the criminals who is crucified next to Jesus says to the other criminal in verse 41 and 42, We are under the sentence of condemnation justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds.

But this man has done nothing wrong. And finally, in verse 47, the Roman centurion who sees the manner of Jesus' death and the cosmic phenomena that surround it concludes, Certainly, this man was innocent.

Innocent Jesus was unjustly condemned. This is the most heinous evil, the most egregious injustice that mankind has ever perpetrated.

Because Jesus is the Christ, the Messianic King, who is worthy of our allegiance. Because Jesus is the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, the one by whom all things were created, to whom we owe our very existence, and who is infinitely worthy of our worship.

[6 : 40] And yet, He was condemned even though Jesus is the Savior who came to save the world and not to condemn the world.

The world condemned Him who came to save them. How wrong is it for people to kill the one who gives them life?

How wrong is it for people to treat Jesus like a criminal when He is in fact the rightful King? And that's not the only thing that is unjust about the situation.

Because whenever there is a miscarriage of justice like this, there is a dual injustice. For example, on March 4th of this year, Ronald Johnson was exonerated and released after spending 34 years in jail.

He was wrongfully convicted of murdering Joseph Goldsby based solely on the false testimony of two witnesses. Just think of the injustice of it all.

[7 : 53] He was 27 years old when he was jailed, and now he is 61 years old. The prime years of his life are gone. But that's not the only injustice.

Somebody did murder Joseph Goldsby, and that murderer went free because Ronald Johnson went to jail.

It is not only unjust that the innocent is wrongly punished, it is also unjust that someone who is guilty goes unpunished as a result of it.

But in Jesus' case, he wasn't unjustly condemned and executed against his will. Jesus went to the cross willingly. As he says in John 10, 18, he laid his own life down.

Why? Because it was the only way that guilty sinners can be mercifully saved. So in this case, it's not an injustice that the guilty go free.

[8 : 59] It's a mercy. In the language of the Old Testament sacrificial system, Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And one of the requirements for a sacrificial lamb was that he be blameless.

So 1 Peter 1 tells us that Christians have been ransomed from their sinful ways with the precious blood of Christ like that of a lamb without blemish.

Only an unblemished lamb, an innocent one, is worthy to be slain as the atoning sacrifice for sin.

That's why Hebrews 4, 15 confirms that in every respect, Jesus was tempted as we are, yet without sin.

1 John 3, 5 confirms that Jesus appeared in order to take away sins and in him there is no sin. The unjust condemnation of innocent Jesus is the only way that guilty sinners like you and me can be mercifully saved.

We see Jesus' role as the sacrificial lamb in several details of this passage. In verses 32 to 33, we are told that Jesus is led away that's led away outside of the city to the place that is called the skull in order to be put to death.

[10 : 21] The sin offering that was offered on the Day of Atonement once a year in the Old Testament times was not burned inside the temple like the other sacrifices. That sin offering was burned outside the camp.

Likewise, to be the atoning sacrifice for the sins of his people, Jesus went outside the camp to be crucified. Hebrews 13, 11, 12 makes this connection explicitly.

for the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So, Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to

sanctify the people through his own blood.

Outside the camp is where criminals sentenced to death were dragged out for execution. we see that in Leviticus 24, 14 and 1 Kings 21, 13.

That's where we deserve to go. We are all guilty sinners who have rebelled against our God and Creator. We may not have murdered anyone but we have all murdered in our hearts by harboring hateful anger against someone else.

[11 : 42] We may not have committed physical adultery or fornication though some of us have done that but we have all committed adultery of the heart by lusting after someone.

We may not have stolen anything from anyone though some of us have done that too but we have all stolen things in our hearts through envy. We have been prideful and self-righteous which is to spit in the face of God in whose presence there is no space for even an ounce of pride and self-righteousness.

We deserve to be dragged out outside the camp but instead Jesus is led outside the camp as if he were a cause of defilement to be killed alongside two other criminals but Jesus is innocent.

He is killed outside the camp because he is the ultimate sin offering for the day of atonement because he is the divinely appointed substitute for guilty sinners.

After being taken outside the camp it says in verse 33 that Jesus is crucified. Two thousand years of Christian history has desensitized us to the shame and the offensiveness of the cross but to Roman and Jewish sensibilities crucifixion was a particularly abominable way to die.

[13 : 10] For the Romans crucifixion was a form of cruel and unusual punishment. It was a form of torture and execution combined into one.

The Romans had perfected several other ways to efficiently kill people and execute people but they used crucifixion for special cases for low life criminals and enemies of the state.

for example they would crucify those guilty of treason in order to make a spectacle of them in order to send a message a gruesome warning to others who might attempt the same.

For the Jews also there was a great stigma and reproach attached to being hanged on a tree because Deuteronomy 21-23 taught that a man who is killed by being hanged on a tree is cursed by God and that's precisely the language that Luke uses here in chapter 23 verse 39 where he says uses the word hanged to describe those who are being crucified.

It's the same word that Luke uses in his sequel to the Gospel of Luke in the book of Acts in Acts 530 and Acts 1039 when he recounts that people put Jesus to death quote by hanging him on a tree.

[14 : 30] this language is making an explicit connection to the Deuteronomy 21-23 Jesus the blessed one was accursed.

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin so in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Jesus faced the damnation of the cross so that we might meet God's salvation. He bore the wrath of God on the cross so that we might receive the mercy of God.

His condemnation on the cross is our justification. His bondage on the cross is our freedom and his death on the cross is our eternal life.

This is the scandal the scandalous injustice of the cross. Innocent Jesus was unjustly condemned so that guilty sinners might be mercifully saved.

[15 : 53] It's so wrong. It's so scandalous. It's so unjust but it's so breathtakingly beautiful and so wondrously glorious because that's how we are saved.

That's why we call Jesus' execution day Good Friday. It was a bad and terrible day on all accounts but it was a good day for sinners like you and me who trust in Jesus.

And one such sinner was a criminal that was crucified alongside Jesus. There were actually two criminals one to Jesus' right and the other to his left and the word that is translated criminal here is a word that means robber a bandit revolutionary or insurrectionist.

it's the same word that is used to describe Barabbas in John 18 40. And as we saw earlier in Luke 23 in one of the scripture readings, Barabbas was specifically described as a rebel who had committed murder in the insurrection.

So these two criminals that are crucified alongside Jesus are no petty thieves. They've done something to merit a capital sentence, perhaps even murder and insurrection.

[17 : 26] They're not good people. And one of the criminals is arrogant and irreverent even as his very life is ebbing away. He joins the scoffing of rulers and the soldiers and rails at Jesus in verse

39.

Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us. His words are dripping with bitter sarcasm and he's kicking Jesus when he is down on the ground.

Even a criminal on death row who is in the process of being executed thinks he can take a dig at Jesus.

The word rail in Greek is the word from which we get the English word blaspheme. It means to slander someone, to speak against, revile, and to defame someone in a way that damages their reputation and name.

Instead of recognizing Jesus for who he really is as the Christ, as the Savior, this criminal stabs Jesus with his cutting irony. But the second criminal steps in to defend Jesus and he rebukes the other criminal in verses 40 and 41.

[18:40] Do you not fear God since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds. But this man has done nothing wrong.

This is a humble admission of guilt. This criminal, unlike the first one, acknowledges that his punishment is just and that it is what he deserves.

But he notes that Jesus has done nothing wrong. And then in verse 42, the criminal turns to Jesus and says, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

It's really an audacious request because he's a criminal on death row. He really has nothing to commend him. I mean, what has he ever done for Jesus?

what's his ticket into the kingdom? But it expresses his humble faith in Jesus. There's not a lot of specifics here.

[19:43] His request is vague probably because his understanding of Jesus is also vague. But he seems to have overheard people ridiculing Jesus as the Christ. And he can see the mocking inscription over Jesus' head, this is the king of the Jews.

And he believes it. So even though he doesn't know how or when Jesus will come into his kingdom, but when he does, the criminal asks, Jesus, remember me.

And Jesus' response in verse 43 is even more shocking than the criminal's request. Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.

Christ. Jesus says, truly, I say to you, that's the expression, amen, verily, truly, I say to you. Jesus doesn't say to him, maybe, I'll think about it.

He says, truly, I say to you, I assure you, I promise you, I give you my word. and Jesus doesn't say, well, after a thousand years, maybe I'll bring you to a kingdom.

[21:02] He says, today you will be with me in paradise. The word today is a significant theological term throughout the gospel of Luke because he uses it repeatedly throughout the gospel to highlight the fact that the window of opportunity for your salvation is not tomorrow, it's today.

This very moment, this evening if you are here, you're not here by coincidence. You are here by the ordaining of the sovereign God.

And this may be your hour of salvation. Today, you might hear the assurance that this criminal heard from Jesus. the criminal asked to be with Jesus in his kingdom and Jesus promises that he will be with him in paradise.

Jesus' kingdom will not be a small, measly, earthly kingdom in a Middle Eastern desert. It will be a paradise, prophesied of in Isaiah 51:3 when God makes Israel's wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord.

This criminal is hanging on a cross atop an open hill in the scorching Middle Eastern sun, parched by the dry air, gasping for breath.

[22:26] Jesus assures him that he will not be for long. Today, you will be with me in paradise. It's a promise of eternal life, of the water of life that flows in that paradise that we see in Revelation.

salvation. It's where the tree of life is that gives eternal life which is in the paradise of God. Jesus' response is staggering because it goes so far beyond what this criminal deserves.

The crucifixion was what this criminal deserved, not paradise. The Bible teaches that at the end of the world when Christ returns, he will judge everyone according to what they have done.

But what good works does this criminal have to show for himself? Nothing. If he is like Barabbas, he is a murderer and an insurrectionist.

His record is against him. He has no good works to merit paradise. not only that, when people come to faith in Jesus, they are supposed to be baptized.

[23 : 49] That's the normal course by which a person becomes a Christian. But this criminal has no chance to go through even that initiatory rite of conversion.

this is a deathbed conversion if there ever was one. Well then, did this criminal at least have good theology?

Almost certainly not. Imagine if Jesus administered a little theology exam on the cross. you said, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Well, here's question number one. Will I bring about an earthly kingdom or a heavenly kingdom?

Your choice, A, B, or both A and B?

You can just imagine his blank stare. Question number two, when exactly will my kingdom come? Is it already here or not yet?

[24 : 59] Will I establish a millennial reign here on earth or reign through the church? And the criminal goes, I don't know.

This criminal would have flunked all the tests. But he knew two things. He knew that he was a sinner. And he knew that Jesus could save him.

And that was enough. Throughout the entire Gospel of Luke, neither angelic beings nor human beings address Jesus simply by his name, as this criminal does.

Jesus. They call him with exalted titles, Jesus of Nazareth, the Holy One of God. They call him Jesus, Son of the Most High God.

They call him Jesus, Master. They call him Jesus, Son of David. But this criminal simply calls him Jesus, which means the Lord saves.

[26 : 07] And that's the only thing that commends this criminal to the paradise or kingdom of God. The only thing that he trusts Jesus, that Jesus remembers him.

This is, at the simplest level, what repentance and faith look like. First, the criminal confessed his sin. We are under the sentence of condemnation.

condemnation justly. For we are receiving the due reward of our deeds. That's repentance. Do you know that that is what you deserve?

Death. Condemnation. And then there's the turning away, after turning away from sin, secondly, there is the criminal putting his faith in Jesus.

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. that's faith. It's as simple as that. This criminal had nothing going for him but this, that Jesus remembered him.

[27 : 23] Please, don't hear what I'm not saying. I'm not saying that doing good works doesn't matter. I'm not saying that baptism doesn't matter. matter. I'm not saying that theology doesn't matter.

As theologian J.I. Packer writes in his book *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, nor do I suggest that ignorance and error are unimportant for spiritual health so long as one has an honest heart and a genuine passion for God.

It is certain that God blesses believers precisely and invariably by blessing to them something of his truth.

And that misbelief as such is in its own nature spiritually barren and destructive. Yet, anyone who deals with souls will again and again be amazed at the gracious generosity with which God blesses to needy ones what looks to us like a very tiny needle of truth hidden amid whole haystacks of mental error.

As I have said, countless sinners truly experience the saving grace of Jesus Christ and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit while their notions about both are erratic and largely incorrect.

[28 : 44] Where indeed would any of us be if God's blessing had been withheld till all our notions were right? every Christian without exception experiences far more in the way of mercy and help than the quality of his notions warrant.

That is the heart of God. Even when he sees only a very tiny needle of truth hidden amidst a whole haystack of mental error, God blesses us on account of that truth.

I don't know what kind of sinner you are. Maybe you've done things in life that you never dare share with anyone. I don't know what kind of good works you have done.

Certainly they are inadequate in light of God's perfect standard. I don't know the ins and outs of your theology. it may be full of errors of various kinds.

But this day, 2,000 years ago, innocent Jesus was unjustly condemned so that guilty sinners like you and me might be mercifully saved.

[30 : 04] so will you join me this evening in simply saying, Jesus, remember me. Jesus, remember me.

me. Father, grant every single man and woman, children, here in this room that simple faith that says, Jesus, remember me.

In the precious name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.