

Text: Lk 23.32-43

Last week I said I was planning to make our afternoon service mostly messages telling “The Story of the Bible.” The plan is for that to start next week, but I am still glad to answer questions. We may slip in some “Ask the Pastor” messages along the way.

Today is our communion service. As I am trying to cram two weeks of work into one (I am out of town most of next week), I thought of resurrecting one of my old communion messages for today.

I was also thinking of the idea of “telling Bible stories...” Psalm 119 is great, but it isn’t a story. I want to engage everyone in the message today, so we are going to look at a narrative for our message today.

That’s all the explanatory...

Now, this message first came about in 1988. I revised it, and preached it again in 2001, actually on June 3, 2001, which happened to be Debbi’s and my anniversary. I am sure she has crystal clear recollection of my message:

A Three Thief View of the Cross

I did a series of messages in the “View of the Cross” communion series back then. The first time I had no computer, it was all pen and ink.

Of the series, this is one of those few messages I can remember preaching, and not just because I did it twice. The story behind this one has really resonated with me.

The first thing we need to do is read our text, to find out which thieves we are talking about.

Read Lk 23.32-43

Of course, we are talking about the thieves crucified with Jesus on the cross.

Now we need to define our terms a little more closely:

- We get the term “thieves” from the κιν (Gk for “thief” = κλέπτης)
- These men have various words applied to them
 - In our passage, they are called “criminals” — κακοῦργος, evil workers
 - In Matthew and Mark, they are called “robbers” — ληστής

What is the difference between a robber and a thief?

A thief, a κλέπτης, steals by fraud secretly

A robber, a ληστής, steals by violence openly

So, these men were brazen criminals. They were violent menaces not only to property, but to people as well.

Their crimes were so great that they would also be crucified alongside Jesus that day.

- Each man would bear his own cross to the place of crucifixion.
- They would be guarded individually by four soldiers each.
- One of a group like this would bear a placard proclaiming his crimes, or else a herald at the head of the procession would bear it.
- The whole procession would be led and supervised by a centurion.
- Jesus would most likely have been in the first, and most prominent position.
- They were led to “Golgotha” the place of execution.
- There, Jesus and the robbers would be bound to their crosses
- Stake planted, cross beam laid out on ground
- Arms extended, bound up, fixed by a nail through each wrist
- Cross beam then drawn up by ropes and fixed to the stake
- Feet secured one or two feet above the ground with a nail through the ankles

“The punishment [of the cross] was invented to make death as painful and as lingering as the power of human endurance. ... And so might the crucified hang for hours, even days, in the unutterable anguish of suffering, till consciousness at last failed.”¹

Often, the one crucified would curse the soldiers and the crowd around. It was a brutal, vulgar, sickening, wild scene.

This crucifixion was unique. One cross was the center of attention. One man did not curse. One endured with grace the pain, the shame, the torture of the cross.

¹ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, vol. 1 (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1896), 589, 580.

Our message today will consider the perspective the thieves (robbers) in the story had of the cross of Christ.

I. the FIRST THIEF – the Railer (32-39)

A. He saw the way Jesus endured the cross (34-38)

1. They all experienced the pain, they also all experienced the derision of the crowd (doubtless)
2. Notice what Jesus endured besides the pain
 - a. Mocking of the crowd (35)
 - b. Mocking of the soldiers (36-37)
 - c. Unjust and mocking charge on the placard Pilate sent with Jesus (38)
3. And he heard Jesus pray for the soldiers who crucified him and were gambling for his clothes (34)

B. His reaction? Heaping more abuse on Jesus (39)

1. To him, Jesus was a pathetic figure
2. He saw Jesus as a useless messiah, maybe as a madman
3. Facing death, he did not see Jesus as the source of life

Anyone who sees Jesus on the cross as a tortured, bleeding, miserable lump of misguided humanity will be lost

II. the SECOND THIEF – the Penitent (32-38, 40-43)

A. He also saw the way Jesus endured the cross (34-38)

1. He also experienced the pain and the shame
2. And he also saw what Jesus endured
 - a. Mocking of the crowd (35)
 - b. Mocking of the soldiers (36-37)
 - c. Unjust and mocking charge on the placard Pilate sent with Jesus (38)
3. He too heard Jesus pray for the soldiers who crucified him and were gambling for his clothes (34)

B. What was his reaction? He rebuked the first robber (40-41)

1. Called him to fear God (40)
2. Confessed the justice of his sentence (41a)
3. Confessed the innocence of Jesus (41b)

Something of what he saw of Jesus in this experience softened the heart of this violent, wicked man:

- a. He knew Jesus was no criminal
- b. He saw in Jesus something more than a condemned madman — he saw the son of God

“In hours of extremity a man may deceive himself and fatally mistake fear for the fear of God, and the remembrance of certain external knowledge for spiritual experience. But, *if* a man really learns in such seasons, the teaching of years may be compressed into moments, and the dying thief on the Cross might outdistance the knowledge gained by the Apostles in their years of following Christ.”²

Note: remember his cries would have been uttered in ragged breaths, as he drew himself upward. It was an effort to speak, and life-preserving energy would be lost.

4. He prays to Jesus (42)
 - a. He sees Jesus for who he is
 - b. He expresses faith in Jesus as the true King, with a coming kingdom
 - c. “Remember me...”

C. The Lord’s gracious response (43)

1. He accepts the second thief’s prayer
2. He promises God’s blessing *today*

² Edersheim, 1:599.

This is the Second Selfless Utterance from the cross.

Any one coming to Christ with this view of the cross will not be turned aside — he will find his own sins nailed there with Jesus.

But... who is the third thief?

III. the THIRD THIEF – the Opportunist (Mk 15.6-15)

A. You will recall the ploy of Pilate to get out of his jam with an innocent Jesus by the custom of releasing a prisoner

1. Custom of the feast [Passover] (6)

- a. Not mentioned in literature other than the Gospels
- b. Nevertheless, Roman magistrates had wide discretion
- c. The silence of others doesn't mean Mark, Matthew, and John were wrong, could well have been a local custom

2. Character of Barabbas (7)

- a. Captured in a group
- b. Leader of insurrection (Matthew: “notable prisoner”)
- c. Convicted murderer
- d. John's gospel uses our term, “robber”

Barabbas is the third thief

B. The Frenzy of the Crowd (8-14)

1. The crowd would have none of Pilate's proposal
2. They would rather have a murderer, a robber, an insurrectionist released than Jesus

C. Barabbas' view of the cross

1. The Chance of a Lifetime (15)

DESCRIBE HIS RELEASE

THIS IS HIS VIEW OF THE CROSS:

2. Escape from immediate danger (he is given “a new life”)
3. Opportunity to ‘serve’ once more at his chosen trade (self-service)

Conclusion:

Three views of the cross:

1. The view of mocking scorn
2. The cynical view of fortunate fate and a new opportunity
3. The repentant view of a humble sinner

Which view is yours?