

Sonoraville Baptist Church
Sunday, February 22, 2010 – 11:00 AM
Rev. Steve Skates, Pastor

Three Crosses - Luke 23:32-33; 39-43

Introduction: A couple of weeks ago, we said there was one important thing everyone needed to know – that your redeemer lives. Knowing that will carry help you deal with the pain and misery of life and make life a little more bearable.

Last week, I told you about the two words God loves to hear – “*Yes, Lord!*” Saying those two words to Jesus will activate a faith that will open up the way for God to do something miraculous in your life.

This morning, I want to focus on the number three. Particularly, I want us to see the three crosses of Golgotha and what they represent. Turn with me to Luke 23. We’ll read vs. 32-33, and vs. 39-43

32 *Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed.*

33 *When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals--one on his right, the other on his left.*

39 *One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"*

40 *But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence?"*

41 *We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."*

42 *Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*

43 *Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."*

As we approach the Easter season, I think it’s important that we understand the significance of the three crosses - what they represent, and how that knowledge can make a difference in our lives. The first cross we’ll see today is:

1. The Cross of Rejection (39)

“One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

Luke 23:39 (NIV)

I want us notice some things about this particular thief and see if they might apply. First:

A. He was Guilty, but there was no Admission of Guilt. This thief had obviously been convicted of some crime that was punishable by death. He was guilty, but like so many criminals, he refused to admit he was wrong. Instead, he was mad that he had been caught, and was venting his frustration and sorrow. But if you read his words you can hear his attitude. He wasn’t sorry that he had sinned against God; he was just sorry that he got caught.

The Bible tells us about the end result of sin and worldly sorrow. **2 Corinthians 7:10 (NIV)** says, “*Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.*”

James 1:15 (NIV) says, “*...and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.*” And **Romans 6:23 (NIV)** says, “*For the wages of sin is death...*”

So, here we see a man reaping what he has sown – his own physical death, and he didn’t like it. **Galatians 6:8 (NIV)** says, “*The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction*”

We see this played out every day. I am acquainted with a family of five brothers, and every one of these boys had become either alcoholics or hooked on drugs, or had gotten in trouble with the law. This had gone on for years, perhaps starting when they were just teenagers They had followed their own pursuit of pleasure.

Well, when they grew up, every one of them in some way have had to reap what they’ve sown. Just last year one of them died at the age of 53 from liver disease. A couple of weeks ago, another brother passed away from the same disease. Still another has been in and out of the hospital as a result of years of drug dependence. Another bears the scars of years of rebellion and gang-related involvement, and the last one is barely able to work because of how drug and alcohol abuse has affected his body.

Now, as far as we know, they are all saved, but their salvation has not pardoned them from the effects of what they’ve done to themselves. They are reaping what they’ve sown, and I’m sure if you were to ask them, they’d tell you they don’t like it.

This thief on the cross of rejection had sown seeds that he hoped would fulfill his own pleasure, but as he hung on his cross, it was costing him his very life and he didn’t like it. Next, we see that with this thief:

B. He Faced the Reality of Jesus, but there was no Belief in Jesus. This thief was almost shoulder to shoulder with the one who could change his life, but look at what he said in vs. 39: He says to the Lord "So you're the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you're at it!" **Luke 23:39 (NLT)**

This was not the question and attitude of a repentant seeker. No, if this had been a seeker's question, he would have said, "You *are* the Christ. Save me!" But he didn't say it that way. His tone reflected his heart which was full of hate and animosity and self-centeredness. His attitude was arrogant and demanding and was reflected the attitude of the devil himself.

If you recall, in **Matthew 4:3 (NIV)**, the devil said to Jesus, "If you're the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

In the Garden of Eden, the devil said to Eve, "Did God really say...?" **Genesis 3:1 (NIV)**.

What I'm telling you is that whenever you find skepticism and doubt or unbelief about what God has said, especially when it comes to salvation, you'll find the devil is behind it.

Jesus was speaking to a group of unbelieving Jewish leaders in **John 8:44 (NIV)** when He told them, "You belong to your father, the devil...there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies."

The devil wants people to doubt what the Word of God says especially about salvation, so he'll lie about it or twist it around and try to make you believe that the Bible is not true, or that it's not trustworthy. If he can make you doubt part of it, he can lead you to doubt all of it.

That is why many people fall into the trap of false religions and cults. They believe the lies of the devil who says, "God didn't really say that there's a hell, did he?" Or "God wouldn't punish you forever, would he?" Or "You don't really believe that there's only one way to heaven, do you?"

When people begin to doubt God and not take Him at His Word, that's when they're headed toward the cross of rejection. Refusing to believe in the truth of God's Word is the same as believing the devil's lies, and that will only lead to eternal misery.

The devil would like nothing better than to bind you up in some false religion or in self-centeredness and bitterness, than let you believe the truth.

Years ago, there was a group called "Heaven's Gate" who ended up killing themselves because they believed that the Hale-Bopp comet was Jesus' way of coming after them to take them to heaven. I mean, it's amazing what lies of the devil people will believe about salvation!

The Bible says **Hebrews 11:6 (NIV)** "...Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." That is how we are to come to God – in faith believing that what He says is the absolute truth. We don't come to Him with skepticism, doubt, or unbelief – but with faith alone. Next, we see that this thief:

C. He was full of Pride instead of Humility. Instead of being humble and looking for mercy, we are told this thief "hurled insults" at Jesus.

One of the peculiar ways people express their affection for others, especially in the entertainment industry, is to "roast" them. A celebrity roast is where one comic after another gets up and relentlessly pokes fun at a fellow entertainer. Then on their way back to their seat, they'll give the "roastee" a big lovable hug. Don Rickles made a living at that form of entertainment.

But this thief had no love or even warm feelings for Jesus, only a harmful pride in himself, so he hurled insults at Jesus. Hurling insults carries the idea that he cursed Jesus and viscerally disrespected Him. His pride took over his senses, and caused him to act this way towards the only one who could save him.

Proverbs 16:18 (NIV) tells us that, "Pride goes before destruction..." This thief's prideful heart led him to believe that he didn't need Jesus or His mercy and grace, although that was the one thing he desperately needed. Instead, this unrepentant thief hung on the Cross of Rejection having no guilt or shame for what he did - having no belief in the Son of God, and showing no humility because of his predicament.

Please don't come to the end of your life as this thief did. Don't keep on rejecting Christ until you become so cold and calloused, that you'd even curse the only one who can save you for eternity. Don't keep on turning your nose up at His offer of grace and mercy, because one day, it will be too late, and you'll be hanging on the cross of rejection. Second, we want to notice:

2. The Cross of Reception – (40-42)

Luke tells us some things about the other thief who was crucified along with Jesus. His whole attitude and demeanor stood in stark contrast to the other thief. First:

A. He Feared God. This thief said to the other thief, *“Don’t you fear God...since you are under the same sentence?”* **Luke 23:40 (NIV)**. Of course, the implication from his question was that he certainly feared God. He knew that this was it as far as his earthly life was concerned. He knew that he had been condemned to die, and there was no way he was going to avoid that fate. So, yes, this man had a certain degree of fear of God.

Now the word “fear” here means “to be in awe of” or “have reverence for.” The book of Proverbs tells us in the first chapter, that *“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge...”* **(1:7 NIV)**, and in later, it says, *“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom...”* **(9:10 NIV)**. So we can see that this man was undergoing a change of heart that began in his mind. This change was being brought about by the middle man on the cross – Jesus Christ. As he saw and heard Jesus’ courage and humility and meekness as He hung on the cross an innocent man; he began to see that this Jesus was more than just a man – He was the Son of God. He began to see that Jesus was controlling His own destiny, and perhaps that meant he could control his too. He began to see himself in light of Jesus, and it brought about a holy fear of God that he’d perhaps never felt before. He came to understand that God indeed was the judge of all things.

Then, in the next verse, we see that this fear of the Lord led to the fact that this thief:

B. He Admitted His Sin.

This thief told the other thief, *“We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”* **Luke 23:41 (NIV)**

Paul tells us in **Romans 3:23 (NIV)** that, *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* And in **Romans 3:10 (NIV)** *“There is no one righteous, not even one.”*

And so we see here that this thief was on the road to salvation. Acknowledgment of sin is the first step of salvation. We tell our kids in VBS, that getting saved is as easy as ABC. The letter “A” stands for “Admit.”

A person must first admit that they are a sinner. If you never come to that point, then you don’t even realize your spiritual condition and predicament.

When I was ordained as a deacon, a man named Tom Farmer was ordained with me. Tom was an older gentleman, who was a relatively new Christian. He gave his testimony in the ordination council of how the former pastor and another deacon used to come by his home and his shop and witness to him from time to time. He said, *“I’d listen to them politely, but when they’d ask me about getting saved, I’d just nod my head and let them talk.”* He said, finally after about three or four months of them coming by and saying the same things over and over, and asking me about getting saved, the preacher looked at the deacon and said, *“Clyde, I don’t think Mr. Tom even knows he’s lost!”* And Mr. Tom said, *“You know, I didn’t! I thought I was just as good as the next guy, because I wasn’t a mean person. I had never cheated anybody or lied to people in my business. I hadn’t even yelled at my wife! I thought I was a good person!”* He said, *“But when they began to explain to me about what it meant to be lost without Christ, I came to understand that I was a sinner in need of a Savior.”*

Until people begin to see themselves as sinners, they’ll see no need to be saved. That is exactly why many Pharisees and religious leaders during Jesus’ day never acknowledged Jesus as the Son of God and submit to His authority. They saw themselves as self-righteous. They trusted in the fact that being the physical seed of Abraham guaranteed them eternal life.

Not much has changed much since then. People are still trusting in their own righteousness, or their heritage, or their education to save them. But the only thing that can save people from their sins is trusting in Jesus Christ to save them. You see, not only did this thief fear God and admit his sin:

C. He Believed in Jesus as Lord, and Confessed His Faith in Him. (41-42)

It’s really quite amazing when you think about it. Here we have a condemned criminal who is slowly dying. In fact, he’s probably about as close to death as one can be and still be alive. He dying next to a man who claims to be a king, but at this moment, he looks like anything but a king. Jesus is bleeding from a beating like no other man has ever endured; He’s stripped down to nothing, and yet this thief believed that he would someday come into his kingdom. In spite of all the outward appearances to the contrary; in spite of the fact that as far as we know, he had never heard Jesus teach, he’d never saw any of His miracles, and he’d never listened to a single parable about the kingdom of God, this man was able to see Jesus as he really was – a king who would someday go to His kingdom.

If you look closely at what this thief said, he followed the ABC's of salvation. He **Admitted** his sin when he said, *"We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. (41). He **Believed** in Jesus when he said, *"But this man has done nothing wrong."(41), and he **Confessed** his faith in Jesus to make Him the ruler of his life when he said, *"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."* **Luke 23:42 (NIV)****

This thief had a different attitude and outlook from his partner in crime on the other cross. Instead of rejecting Jesus in pride, he received Jesus in humility as his personal Lord and Savior that day. This thief realized that only his only hope for a future life somewhere lay in his faith in this man on the cross named Jesus. He recognized that Jesus was indeed a king who would inherit His kingdom someday, and he wanted to be a part of it. He wanted Jesus to be his Lord – his master and supreme authority in his life.

Romans 10:13 (NIV) tells us that *"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."* This thief did that. He came to Jesus humbly, he admitted his sin, believed on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and cried out to God for his mercy, and received Him as His Lord and Savior.

John 1:12 (NIV) says, *"Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."* This leads us to the third cross - the center cross. It's

3. The Cross of Redemption (43)

The word, *"redeem"* means *"to buy back from a slave market."* The two thieves had lived their lives in the slave market of sin. They had sold out to the devil, and their years of following him had led them to be taken captive by their self-seeking quest of their own pleasures. And now their wickedness was about to cost them their earthly life.

The first thief was not willing to acknowledge his evil ways. He had chosen the path of self-destruction, and soon, he would enter eternity without any hope for reconciliation.

But the second thief chose to acknowledge his sinful past and humble himself at the cross. It was what we would call *"a deathbed confession."* Now, let me say here, that there is such a thing possible as a death-bed repentance, but I wouldn't count on it. I mean, you have no assurance that you'll have the opportunity. Your death may be as quick as you can snap your finger. No, you need to do your repenting while you have the opportunity, and don't wait.

But my point here is that this thief, even though he repented at the last possible minute, he still experienced the full measure of God's grace and mercy as he came to Jesus in faith believing that he would remember him in his kingdom.

Paul says of God in **Colossians 1:13-14 (NIV)** *"For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."* And in **Romans 3:24 (NIV)**, he says that we *"are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."*

When Jesus told the repentant thief in vs. 43, *"...today you will be with me in paradise,"* He was saying that He had paid the price for his redemption. He was rescuing him from the *"dominion of darkness"* and was bringing him into the glorious light of His kingdom. In this paradise, he would be freely justified by His grace. In other words, this thief would stand before the throne of God forgiven and free from the penalty of sin – just as if he had never sinned. And it was all because of what Jesus was doing on that third cross.

You talk about good news for a dying man, this was it! I like what the hymn writer, William Cowper said, *"The dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day; and there may I, though vile as he, wash all my sins away."* Anyone can have their sins washed away by the blood of the Lamb.

Conclusion: This morning, have you come to the cross of redemption? If you have, which side are you on? Are you on the side of Rejection or Reception? It's an important question because your eternity depends on it.

Continued rejection will lead you to an eternity without Christ. But reception will lead you to a paradise in heaven with Jesus forever.

As we stand and as we sing, I urge you to stand on the right side of the cross. Stand with the repentant thief, and make Jesus the Lord of your life. Paradise is awaiting you.