

## CRIES FROM THE CROSS – CRIES OF ASSURANCE

Luke 23:32-43, John 19:25-27

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During this season of Lent, we are looking at Jesus' "*Cries from the Cross*" – the seven last words of Christ before He died, because the last words of anyone that is dying are important. However, no last words are as important and significant as those of Jesus on the cross because they speak into our human condition. On the cross we are experiencing Jesus' heart and His sacrificial love for all mankind, and on this journey into the heart of Jesus, we can find healing for our deepest needs and hurts as well, as the Old Testament prophet Isaiah declared what Jesus accomplished for us on the cross, "***Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering...he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed***" (Isaiah 53:4-5). Let's read that again and this time make it personal – by replacing our with "*MY,*" us with "*ME,*" and we are with "*I am!*"

Jesus' first words to us from the cross – "***Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing***" (Luke 23:34) was a cry of pardon for those that had nailed Him to the cross. Jesus cries out to His Heavenly Father for mercy to those who are carrying out this great act of injustice, those who had fallen into Satan's trap and ended up crucifying the Messiah, the Son of God. Amazingly, the suffering Saviour's very first cry from the cross was pardon for those cruel hardened Roman soldiers who were experts at pain and torture. Amazingly, the suffering Saviour cried out for pardon for the legalistic Pharisees who charged Jesus with blasphemy, for claiming He was equal to God. Amazingly, the suffering Saviour cried out for pardon for the crowd that had shouted out before Pilate, "*crucify Him, crucify Him,*" and lastly pardon for those mockers at the foot of the cross hurling insults. Thank you Heavenly Father that you do not hold our sins against us when we don't know what we are doing!

**Luke 23:32-43** tells us that Jesus was crucified alongside of two criminals – one on His right, the other on His left, and at the crucifixion site not only the Roman soldiers were mocking Jesus and the gathered crowd were mocking Jesus, but also one of the criminals mocked Jesus, while the other criminal did not. **Luke 23:39-41**, "***One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other criminal rebuked him, 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence? We are being punished justly, for we are getting what we deserve. But this man has done***

***nothing wrong.***” What I find truly amazing here is that one of these hardened criminals dying alongside of Jesus recognized Him as the Messiah, while the Pharisees and religious leaders, those teachers of the Law, who should have known better, did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah!

This incident is an excellent example of and acclaim for death bed conversion. Nailed to a cross, with death at his doorstep – one of the dying criminals decides to put his faith in Jesus, while the other criminal continues to curse God to his dying breathe. Turning to Jesus, one of the criminals asks Him this favour: ***“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”*** (Luke 23:42), and Jesus immediately grants his request: ***“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise”*** (Luke 23:43). Notice, there’s no sinner’s prayer called for, no time to join a church, or be baptized, or do good works, only immediate assurance of Paradise!

This incident on the cross demonstrates the sinful nature of every human – we aren’t any better off than these criminals, we are lost and without hope until we come to realize our sinfulness and need of a Saviour. In God’s eyes we are all criminals because, from birth, God declares all of us guilty of sin, and as a result we have all been condemned to death. In the case of these criminals, death was imminent, minutes or hours away, and unlike most of the people who walk this earth, these criminals knew they didn’t have much time left, because no one survives a Roman crucifixion. Finding yourself nailed to a cross doesn’t give you much hope of a long productive life, so as these criminals faced imminent death, they both had to decide, there-and-then, about where they would spend eternity. One choose wisely and the other chose poorly!

This incident on the cross should be a wake-up call for all of humanity – because it describes our condition perfectly. While God blesses us on this earth in numerous ways: He gives us life; He gives us talents and opportunities; He gives us the ability to earn money; He gives us a family and friends; and yet, most often we aren’t thankful; instead, we grumble and complain and serve ourselves rather than God in return for His numerous blessings. Rather than being thankful, giving glory and praise to God, we live for ourselves and serve our selfish interests and desires. So, as we look at this scene of the three crosses at the place called, Golgotha; who do we resemble most? Don’t we see ourselves as being more like those two sinful criminals, one on Christ’s right, the other on His left, rather than resembling the holy one in the centre, Jesus Christ. So, isn’t everyone looking for assurance – the

assurance that we are accepted by God and have the guarantee of a home in Heaven!

Most people find it difficult to think or talk about death and where they will spend eternity. People have difficulty dealing with their mortality, so they try and avoid it as long as possible, but we all have to eventually wrestle with our mortality and where we will spend eternity. We are thankful whenever anyone comes to faith in Christ early in life as a child or young adult, having many years of serving Him, but we are also especially thankful when God's grace comes to those that are lying on their death bed late in life and they make a decision for Christ. YES, while a death bed conversion is better late than never, it's a highly risky place to put your eternal fate, since death is unpredictable. Some die a long slow death due to a terminal illness in which they have ample time to accept Christ; then others die suddenly as a result of an accident or a fatal heart attack before they may even have a chance to decide for Christ, but here at the cross we find assurance and hope for the worst of sinners. The assurance that repentant sinners can enter Paradise even on their death bed or seconds before they die, regardless of how terrible their sins may have been, when they come to acknowledge Christ as the Son of God and put their hope in Him. And that's our hope for our unsaved loved ones as we continuously pray for their salvation!

Luke's Gospel tells us – on that Good Friday morning, two *“bad-to-the-bone”* thieves, hardened criminals of the state were being rightly crucified on crosses for their actions against Rome; however, as the story unfolds, by late afternoon a repentant thief was forgiven by God and welcomed into Paradise. Nailed to crosses, these criminals were out of options, it was too late to start life over again, it was too late to turn over a new leaf and try living a better life. So, the moral of this crucifixion scene is that facing death, sinking to the very bottom of the pit of despair and hopelessness, can bring some to Christ. Facing the consequences of living a life that has been out-of-control and out of touch with God, will help some to realize the foolishness and blindness of their own sinful heart, and help them to realize their need for forgiveness. But unfortunately for some reason, some will never come to repentance, never reach out to God, regardless of how close to death they may be, and as a result will die in their sins.

While both of these criminals were suffering the very same consequences and fate for their sins; one repented, while the other did not. While both of these criminals were in the presence of the Saviour who could save their soul, one recognized the

Messiah, while the other did not. Amazingly, one recognised that Jesus was a King, ruling a Kingdom that is not part of this world, as he pleaded for mercy, ***“Jesus, remember me when you come into your KINGDOM”*** (Luke 23:42).

What is even more remarkable – is that this criminal had faith without sight. Think about this scene: three men were nailed to crosses that Good Friday; three men will shortly die a horrific and painful death. Three men were equally helpless! Even Jesus, though He was the Son of God allowed Himself to become totally helpless. Even Jesus, though He had the power to come down off of the cross and call a legion of angels to destroy His enemies, willingly chose to die, because it was His Father’s will. So, at that moment, as the repentant criminal spoke those words, it appeared to the world that Jesus also needed saving; at that moment Jesus also hung as an unfortunate victim, who also needed to be saved, not as the King of an eternal KINGDOM. So, who in their right mind, when they need saving, would turn to someone who is dying right alongside of them? Yet one of the criminals believed by faith, not by sight, and ended up in Paradise that day!

And then on this Good Friday, what about Jesus’ disciples who had faithfully followed Him for the last three years? Where were they as Jesus hung bleeding and dying on the cross? Did they no longer believe that Jesus was the Messiah? When things got heated-up, out-of-control and dangerous, Jesus’ disciples scattered; yet here we have a criminal that believed without spending years under His ministry, and without the evidence of the Resurrection and the Ascension which we have today. This criminal believed without most likely every listening to Jesus’ teaching about the KINGDOM of God, or seeing Jesus walk on the water, heal the sick, give sight to the blind, feed the 5000, cast out demons, or raise Lazarus from the dead. **IT WAS BLIND FAITH!** It was incredible faith to put your hope into a dying Saviour nailed to a cross beside you. It’s hard for me to imagine that kind of faith. In fact, it’s impossible for me to imagine that kind of faith!

This incident in which Jesus cries out for the second time from the cross – should challenge every believer, because it gives us clear evidence of the kind of faith that many of us are lacking. The Holy Spirit was equally drawing both of these men back to God; however, one responded with great faith, while the other only responded with rebuke. The criminal’s journey of faith began when he was convicted of his sins and started to rebuke the other criminal. Listen to what he says to his partner in crime: ***“Don’t you fear God, since you are under the same***

*sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong*” (Luke 23:40-41). One thief admitted that he was a sinner and was getting exactly what he deserved, he was suffering rightly for his crimes against Rome, but remarkably, he also saw them as sins against God, who he would be facing soon and give an account of his life. And notice, he didn’t make excuses for himself! He knew full well that others were disappointed in him, realizing that his life had been a mess, knowing that his parents along with his family and friends wouldn’t be very proud of him right now, and most likely would be happy to forget him; however, who wants to be forgotten, especially by your loved ones at your time of death. So, struggling with each word, this thief turns to Jesus, and asks only one thing of Him – he asks that he would not be forgotten and forsaken by God, **“Jesus, REMEMBER ME when you come into your kingdom”** (Luke 23:41). Jesus, even if everyone else forgets about me, Jesus would you remember me and speak on my behalf before Your Heavenly Father! Jesus I put my hope in you!

Blocking out and ignoring the mocking and un-believing crowd surrounding them that day, who were sneering at Jesus and shouting, **“He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One”** (Luke 23:35), one of the criminals believed and put his faith in Jesus, not caring about the opinion of the others. So, as his reward, this faithful, repentant criminal will not only be remembered; he will be reunited with Jesus in Paradise. The night before His death, Jesus had already made a similar promise to His closest friends, His disciples, as they celebrated the Last Supper together, **“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also will be where I am”** (John 14:1-3). Incredibly, this stranger, this criminal, who had a death bed conversion, received the exact same promise as Jesus’ closest friends, His disciples, who had followed Jesus faithfully for three years. Incredibly, this criminal will be just as safe in the arm of Jesus, as if he would have served Jesus from his youth. What an incredible picture of God’s mercy and grace for those who turn their hearts towards Christ with their dying breathe!

The last thing we need to realize here is that both criminals prayed – but only one of those prayers were answered. Luke records that over Jesus’ head was written an inscription in Greek, Latin and Aramaic, **“THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS!”**

And because of this sign, all of the soldiers laughed and scoffed at Jesus, saying, *“Hey! If you’re the king of the Jews, why don’t you save yourself?”* And one of the criminals joins the soldiers, and it becomes his unanswered prayer, ***“Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”*** (Luke 23:39). In this criminal’s self-centred prayer, there was no acknowledgment of his sins, no remorse or repentance, no fear of God; as a result, his prayer was not answered, and he died as he lived – lost, without hope, guilty of sin!

Both criminals were given the same opportunity to receive mercy and grace, both given equal opportunity to make things right with God, as they both would have heard those very first words of Jesus from the cross, ***“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”*** (Luke 23:34). So, they should have both come to realize that if God was willing to forgive these cruel heartless Roman soldiers for torturing His Son and nailing Him to the cross, God could forgive anyone, even them. However, one called on Jesus for help in his time of need, while the other only mocked Christ. Now, isn’t that exactly how we tend to see the entire human race – some will call on Jesus for help in their time of need, while the rest only mock Christ, complain and curse, using Christ’s holy name in vain?

It is in this way that the cross divides all of humanity! All races, nations, cultures, and even families are divided by the cross. On one side of Jesus are those that come to believe, while on the other side of Jesus are those that choose not to believe; instead, they justify themselves by their good works and by their good behaviour, confident and determined to stand before God on their good record, believing God will look the other way and excuse all of their bad behavior as insignificant to keep them out of Paradise. Then there are those that foolishly give this excuse, *“I still have lots of time, I will decide later.”* However, those who have ignored and refused the Gospel their entire lives will end up dying just as they lived life, without hope and lost in their sins! It’s no wonder the writer of Hebrews asked this question, ***“How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him”*** (Hebrews 2:3). The Bible clearly gives us the answer to this question: *“There is no escaping God’s judgment without acknowledging Christ as our Messiah.”*

Two criminals – one on Jesus’ right, the other on His left, where being judged by Rome for their sins, and imminent physical death would come to both of them in a matter of minutes or hours, and then they would face God. Luke tells us the

eternal fate of one of the criminals, ***“Today you will be with me in Paradise;”*** however, we are never told the eternal fate of the other thief. I don’t want to make any assumptions here, but I don’t believe we want to know the terrible eternal fate that awaits those that reject and curse God to their dying breathe. One chose wisely! One chose poorly!

I want us to now turn to **John 19:25-27** where Jesus gives us another cry of assurance from the cross. The Apostle John was an eyewitness to the crucifixion. John didn’t run from the suffering of the Saviour like the other disciples. John was at the foot of the cross with three women, Jesus’ mother Mary, Mary’s sister the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene from whom Jesus cast out seven demons. Now Jesus turns His attention away from the criminals towards these four at the foot of the cross, as He speaks a third time. Jesus first speaks to His mother, ***“Dear woman, here is your son,”*** and then He speaks to John, the disciple whom He loved, ***“Here is your mother.”***

As Jesus looked out to the mocking crowd – His gaze fell on the first human eyes He had seen years earlier in Bethlehem in a stable the day of His birth. Now, 33 years later Jesus sees His mother standing there holding onto John, and at that moment had compassion for her, realizing the deep anguish that she must be going through, seeing her Son being mocked and dying such a horrific death at the hands of Roman soldiers. In a tremendous display of grace and compassion, Jesus gives His mother these words of assurance, ***“Dear woman, here is your son”*** (John 19:26). As a faithful first born son, from the cross Jesus makes provisions for the care of His widowed mother before He dies, giving her the assurance that she will be looked after. Jesus’ earthly father Joseph had died many years earlier, and there’s no mention of any other family members, half-brothers or half-sisters present at the crucifixion to support their mother; Jesus’ family was absent for some reason. So, as the eldest son in a single parent home, Jesus must provide for His widowed mother according to Jewish tradition.

Since John was the only disciple to return and stand at the foot of the cross to watch his Master suffer and die and support Mary, Jesus in excruciating pain turns to John, the disciple whom He loved, and gives the care of His mother over to him; telling John, ***“Here is your mother”*** (John 19:27). By these words Jesus had designated John to take care of Mary as if she were his own mother, giving His mother the assurance that she will be cared for. Here at the cross, Jesus was telling

His mother that she would have to adopt John as if he was her very own, and then as best as he could, John would fill the aching void Jesus' death would bring into Mary's life as her caretaker until the day she died. So, in this scene at the foot of the cross, Mary was losing one Son, but gaining another!

Let's put ourselves into Mary's sandals for a moment – her life radically changed when God sent the angel Gabriel to announce that she would give birth to the Son of God. Her shocked response to the angel was: ***“How will this be, since I am a virgin”*** (Luke 1:34), the angel Gabriel responded, ***“Nothing is impossible with God”*** (Luke 1:37), and Mary accepts God's calling upon her to give birth to the promised Messiah, ***“I am the Lord's servant...May your word to me be fulfilled.”*** Then, when Jesus was eight days old, Mary and Joseph took Him to the Temple for His circumcision and dedication, where they met an old prophet named Simeon. The Bible says Simeon was filled with the Holy Spirit, and taking Jesus into his arms prophesied to Mary, a prophesy that was now being fulfilled at the cross: ***“This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too”*** (Luke 2:34-35).

Days after Jesus' birth, Mary had been warned something would happen to Jesus that would hurt her so deeply it would be like a sword plunged into her heart. So, as Mary stood at the foot of the cross, she finally came to realize what Simeon was referring to, and her pain can only be understood by any parent that stands by the bedside of their dying child, watching them suffer and die. Mary who had planted kisses on the brow of that little child, was now crowned with thorns. Mary who had held those little hands as Jesus learned to walk, now saw those hands pierced with nails. Mary who had cradled Jesus in her arms when He fell and scraped His knees, was now helpless, watching Him writhing in pain on a cruel wooden implement of torture. However, we need to see beyond all that was happening that day and see how Mary, who had deeply loved her Son Jesus from birth, needed to now come to love her Son even more at His death, as Jesus was now fulfilling His purpose and calling – finishing the work for which He came – to save the world and destroy the works of the devil.

Mark Lowry's popular Christmas song, *“Mary, did you know”* – puts this situation into context when he sings, *“This son that you delivered would one day deliver you.”* That's exactly what Jesus was doing on that Good Friday. On the cross,

Jesus was not only delivering the sins of the entire world, but was also delivering His mother from her sins, her sorrows, and her grief. This scene with Jesus' mother means that Jesus cares for us during the most painful and sorrowful experiences of our lives, right at the moment when loss and helplessness cripples us, Jesus speaks into our lives. So, whenever your heart is breaking and your pain is overwhelming, you may wonder, *“Does anyone know the pain and heartache I'm going through? Does anyone even care?”* Well, this scene at the cross tells us that Jesus cares and is fully aware of your pain, your grief and your sorrows. As **1 Peter 5:7** tells us, ***“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”*** Just as He did for His mother Mary on that Good Friday, Jesus has opened His arms wide on the cross to let us all know that He cares for us because He is a loving and compassionate Saviour, giving us the assurance that He is there with us when we need Him the most.

This second and third cry of Jesus from the cross – these cries of assurance must reach the ears of all who call themselves Christ followers, especially in these times when society is so broken, and so full of hurt and hopelessness. There are tremendous needs all around us, and those who follow Jesus should be the first to embrace and care for the hurting in our society, so the church is called to be Jesus to these hurting and broken people, giving them the assurance that they are deeply loved by God and by His followers. That God cares about them, and we care about them, especially during those times of grief and suffering!

And then the good news of Christ's second and third cries of assurance from the cross means that Jesus' words are still true today. As Christ comforted and gave hope to that criminal 2000 years ago with His promise of Paradise, He still comforts and gives hope to repentant sinners today; telling us that with one act of faith in Christ, God can save even the worst of sinners, even during a death bed conversion. And as Christ comforted His mother, looking after her future needs, Jesus still meets our needs, giving us assurance that He will never leave us nor forsake us when we are hurting and suffering great loss. The Good News message of the cross tells us that we serve a loving, merciful, and gracious God, who is more than ready to forgive sinners, even the worst of sinners, and also meet us right in the midst of our pain, our loss, and our sorrow with words of comfort and assurance. Oh, what a Saviour!