

## Three Crucified Men.

Text: Luke 23:32-33, 39-43

Suggested Hymns:

52, 66, 335, 292, 68

1) The man on the central cross

2) The man on one side of the central cross

3) The man on the other side of the central cross

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Luke 23:32-33, 39-43, <sup>32</sup> *There were also two others, criminals, led with Him to be put to death.* <sup>33</sup> *And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left.*

<sup>39</sup> *Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us."* <sup>40</sup> *But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation?"* <sup>41</sup> *"And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong."* <sup>42</sup> *Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."* <sup>43</sup> *And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

On this lovely day of Autumn I invite you to come with me to the slopes of a God-forsaken hillside. The odour of death hangs low over its barren rocks. Soul-piercing cries of bodies racked with pain, and burning with the fever of death arise from its crest. Three crosses stand silhouetted against the darkened sky. We are at Calvary.

We go to Calvary not simply to witness a scene of cruel brutality, but to meet three men who have been submitted to the painful ordeal of death by crucifixion. Today we shall become acquainted with these men who, from their elevated positions of agony bring a message of utmost importance and significance for us.

Therefore let us consider each of the three crucified men. May the Lord bless our meditation.

## 1. Three Crucified Men The MAN On The Central Cross

We meet first the MAN upon the central cross. His agony seems the greatest, His pain the most excruciating, His anguish the deepest. Who is He?

A signboard near the top of the vertical beam of His cross identifies Him. The superscription reads, “*Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.*” A king? A king being crucified?

In trying Him the Roman governor asked, “*Are You a king then?*”<sup>1</sup> Jesus of Nazareth replied, “*You say rightly that I am a king.*” He qualified His statement by telling Pilate, “*My kingdom is not of this world.*”<sup>2</sup>

The superscription describes Him as the “*King of the Jews.*” He is the King whom the Jews had long awaited. He is the Promised One — the Messiah who was to come. Already in the Garden of Eden His coming had been foretold to Adam and Eve, after they had committed the world’s first sin by eating of the forbidden fruit. The justice of a righteous God demanded that punishment be dealt out for sin.

However, God, who hates sin, still loved these sinners. Before banishing Adam and Eve from Paradise, Jesus, the Messiah, was promised. To the serpent, through whom Satan had deceived Eve, God said, “*I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel.*”<sup>3</sup>

*He shall bruise your head.* That means that Christ shall bruise Satan’s head. The bruised head spells defeat. Christ would win the battle and conquer the devil.

*And you shall bruise His heel.* In other words Satan shall bruise Christ’s heel, which means that the devil would try to tempt Christ to sin and kill Him.

So as it was through the woman that Satan brought sin and death into the world, so it was through the woman’s offspring that God would conquer sin, death and Satan.

The promised Seed of the Woman is Jesus, as Paul says. This promise continued through the generations. That this Seed is Christ we read in Galatians 3:16, ***“Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as of many, but as of one, “And to your Seed,” who is Christ.***

On His cross Jesus is crushing the power of Satan and freeing man from sin. In the agony of the hour Jesus is making men once more acceptable and righteous in God’s sight.

### A King Long Promised

Down through the centuries this promise of the Messiah, who would free man from the slavery of sin, was repeated over and over again. Isaiah proclaimed it most beautifully when he prophesied concerning Jesus, ***Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed.<sup>4</sup>***

Who is this figure upon the central cross? He is Jesus of Nazareth. He is more than just a good and kind man facing a cruel and ignominious death. He is our King and Messiah. He is the One of whom the Angel Gabriel said to Joseph, ***“you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.”<sup>5</sup>***

Why is He spiked to a cross? Why is He suspended between heaven and earth? Because God’s justice demanded that restitution be made for the transgressions and failings of the human race, and as the Substitute for all mankind Jesus is willingly bearing the anguish and pain of body and soul which all of us should have borne in eternal torment.

Oh, what a privilege to meet and know the Man upon the central cross! Believing in Him spells the difference between bondage to sin and freedom from sin, between the wrath of God and the love of God, between eternal damnation and eternal salvation.

## **2. Three Crucified Men The Man On One Side Of The Central Cross**

But two others hang dying on Calvary's hill. What of them? What messages for souls of men do they bring from their crosses? The account tells us that both were criminals. They had committed crimes which in their land carried the penalty of death. They were paying that awful price. Unlike Jesus, who had lived in perfect righteousness, they had been evil, unjust men. In the eyes of the state and society, they deserved to die.

A thief hangs on each side of our blameless Lord. Scripture does not say who was on the left or right, the one who rejected Christ or the one who repented, nor does it matter.

Scripture does say, however, why Jesus was crucified with criminals, as we read in Mark 15:27-28, <sup>27</sup> *With Him they also crucified two robbers, one on His right and the other on His left.* <sup>28</sup> *So the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And He was numbered with the transgressors."* This was the fulfilment of Isaiah 53:12.

One of them speaks to Jesus first. In words filled with sarcasm and ridicule he says, *"If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us."*<sup>6</sup> He has heard of Jesus. He has heard that He is the Son of God. But he does not believe what he has heard.

He does not believe that Jesus is God's Son. He does not believe that Jesus has the power He claims to have. In his unbelief he is not willing to recognise Jesus as the One who is able to take away the guilt and curse of his sin.

The eternal drama taking place upon the cross next to him does not make a saving impression upon his soul. Rather he refuses to believe that the crucified Jesus is his Saviour and Redeemer. And so he goes down into death, joining in the jeering and scoffing of the multitude whose hate-filled hearts have moved them to stain their souls with the blood of God's innocent Son.

Christ is dying to remove his damning blemish of sin, but he will not have it removed. Our Lord is pouring out His life-blood to wash away all his guilt, but he will not be cleansed. He refuses to accept the fellowship of his Saviour. He is a vivid and glaring example of those who will not believe, who pass from life to death with their sins upon their own souls.

### The Tragedy of Rejection

Because he rejected our Lord, the heavenly Father also had to reject him. Because he refused to acknowledge the Kingship of Christ, he excluded himself from the kingdom of God. Jesus had said in Luke 10:16, <sup>16</sup> *“He who hears you hears Me, he who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me.”* He despised Jesus, and he despised God the Father, who sent Christ as Saviour. He closed the door upon God’s love and would not come. He banished himself to a far worse agony than the crucifixion. He cast himself into the dungeon where there is eternal weeping and gnashing of teeth.

His is the deepest tragedy of Calvary, but it is no different from that of countless men and women in his day and in our day. Even in these latter days there are multitudes who reject and spurn the Saviour. They refuse to believe that salvation has been wrought for them.

There are those who openly scoff at and ridicule our Jesus. There are others who will not acknowledge His suffering and death as sufficient for their salvation. There are those who want to stand on their own merits.

Whether they openly show their contempt for Jesus or follow Him only in admiration because of a life nobly lived, or do homage to Him as a great Teacher, in the end their fate is the same as that of this thief who turned away from Jesus. They join him in the place of perdition. They shall never come out. Man cannot pay sin’s price on either side of the grave.

### **3. Three Crucified Men**

#### **The Man On The Other Side Of The Central Cross**

There is also one other man being crucified with Jesus. His crimes before the Roman state are the same as those of the first thief. He admits that his execution is just. At the bar of Caesar’s justice he stood equally condemned. As he partnered in the same shameful life of evil, he now shares the horrors of crucifixion.

But before our God his case is different. The difference between him and his companion in crime is as wide as the gulf between heaven and hell. What distinction lies between him and the other thief?

At first he also, like his fellow criminal, jeered and mocked our Lord. But later we note a great change in him. Turning to his partner in crime and judgment, he says in our text, *“Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under*

*the same condemnation? <sup>4</sup> “And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.”*

Here is an unexpected but sincere acknowledgment of sin and guilt, with a strong undertone of sorrow. Some kind of confession from a criminal when he has run his course is not uncommon. But what about this, *“Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”* A self-confessed criminal of the lowest order in that final hour recognised in the divine Sufferer One who would rule beyond the grave, One in whose bleeding and holy hands he could safely place his soul’s destiny.”

### The Miracle of Acceptance

And Jesus answered him, *“Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.”* Jesus assured him of forgiveness and of heaven. How could Jesus promise paradise to a criminal? Because in His suffering in that very hour He was removing this criminal’s heavy guilt before God.

If you and I want to receive forgiveness for our sins and iniquities, if we want to appear faultless before God, we must place ourselves in the position of the penitent thief. We must despair of any merit or worthiness of our own. We must acknowledge and confess our sin.

We must turn for mercy to our bleeding and suffering Christ, and He will tell us, too, that we shall be with Him in Paradise. In faith we must see in Him the Lamb of God who takes away our sin.

To you, me, and all sorrowful sinners, Jesus calls and says, *“the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.”<sup>7</sup>* May our response be, *“O Lamb of God, I come.”* Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> John 18:37

<sup>2</sup> John 18:36

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 3:15

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 53:4-5

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 1:21

<sup>6</sup> Luke 23:39

