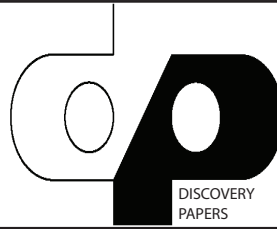


THE SAVIOR WE NEED

SERIES: INVITED: STORIES OF
WELCOME IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE.



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Luke 23:32-43
Final Message
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Have you ever been given something that you didn't want, but you did need?

My dad has a tradition of giving my mom gifts like this. Some of his best have been a lawn mower for Mother's Day, a shop vac(uum) for Christmas, and a pole saw for her birthday. Okay, maybe she didn't need all of these things. Maybe he was the one that needed them. And I should say in his defense, all of these gifts were always accompanied by a real gift.

I'm sure we have all gotten things that we needed, even if we didn't really want them. Socks at Christmas, veggies at dinner, etc.. When I graduated from high school, my grandparents got me suitcases. These were nice suitcases, but as an 18-year-old I didn't want suitcases! But over the next several years of traveling back and forth from college, I realized that I really did need them.

Sometimes it is hard to differentiate between what we want and what we need. Last weekend, a group of us from the Young Adult Fellowship went to Yosemite. That was the first time I had camped in Yosemite, and it was amazing. I became inspired to camp more often, and also to try to get to some of the other national parks. When I came home, I looked up the 10 most popular national parks in the US and added them all to my bucket list.

Just for fun, I plotted a road trip to visit all of these national parks. If you start here in Palo Alto, and then (in order) go to Yosemite, Olympic (in Washington), Glacier, Yellowstone, Grand Teton, Rocky Mountain, Acadia (in Maine), Great Smoky Mountains (in Tennessee), Grand Canyon, and Zion national parks, you will have driven just over 9,000 miles. Add in driving through the parks themselves, stopping for food and other necessities, and it could easily be over 10,000 miles.

So let's assume I take a month off to do this. Obviously I would invite my wife, Linzy, but she hates long car rides so she would turn me down. While I am gone, the only thing that I do to my car is fill it up with gas. No other maintenance. When I get back and look at my car, the thing that I would *want* to do is take it to

a car wash. This thing hasn't been washed in weeks. It's covered in dirt, salt, and bugs from every corner of the US, so I really would want to take it to a car wash.

But is a wash what my car really needs? Not really. It would sure be nice. But it doesn't need one. What my car needs, rather, is an oil change. I've just put over 10,000 miles on my car. If I don't get an oil change soon, my engine is in serious danger of seizing up—if it hasn't already. I might want to take my car to get washed, but I *need* to take it to get the oil changed.

Today we are concluding our series called *Invited* by looking at one final story from the Gospel of Luke: Jesus' crucifixion. Specifically, we are going to look at the scene in which we find Jesus interacting with the two criminals who were crucified beside him. Both of these criminals knew what they wanted—they wanted to be saved. However, only one of these men recognized what he truly needed: not for his body to be saved in this life, but for his soul to be saved in the next. This man recognized that Jesus was the only one who could do this for him. He understood that Jesus is the Savior we need.

Our text for this morning is Luke 23:32-43. Before we read the passage, let me remind us of what has happened leading up to this.

Jesus has been arrested by the Jews because of his claims to be the Messiah. But the Jews couldn't have him killed, so they hand him over to the Romans. Since the Romans wouldn't care about this religious conflict that the Jews were having with Jesus, the Jewish leaders make Jesus out to be a political threat. "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king" (Luke 23:2).

After questioning Jesus, Pilate becomes convinced that Jesus is in fact not a political threat—or any sort of threat—and he wants to release him. However, the pressure from the Jews is so great that Pilate eventually gives in and has Jesus beaten and sentenced to be crucified.

This is where our text picks up.

Luke 23:32-43:

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 33 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. 34 And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And they cast lots to divide his garments. 35 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!” 36 The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine 37 and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” 38 There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

39 One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” 40 But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” 42 And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” 43 And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Crucified with Criminals

As we saw in our text, two men were crucified with Jesus—both of them criminals. While it is common to think of these two men as thieves, this is probably not the case. The word used to describe them here is a more general term for any lawbreaker. It is likely that these men were insurrectionists—most likely Jewish—who were trying to subvert Roman authority in some way. Crucifixion was a crime that was typically reserved for political enemies of this sort.

The Romans crucified Jesus with these men to make a point: This is what happens to those who oppose Rome. However, Luke has a different reason for mentioning this. He wants us to see these events as a fulfillment of Isaiah 53:12, “and [he] was numbered with the transgressors, yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.” The first part was apparent to all. Jesus was numbered among the transgressors. In the eyes of all who watched, Jesus was just one of three criminals

being killed that day. The irony is that the only person who seemed to understand what Jesus was really doing on the cross was one of criminals that hung next to him.

Notice what is said about the crucifixion in v. 33. “When they came to the place that is called the Skull, they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.”

We know that crucifixion was an incredibly brutal form of torture and death. This is clearly portrayed in films like *The Passion of the Christ*.¹ As Mel Gibson directs that movie, he wants us to experience some of what it was like to witness this horrible event.

But in Luke 23:33, the crucifixion is not described in any detail at all. Surely, the first-century readers would have known what a crucifixion looked like. But still, we would have expected Luke to give us at least a few of the details. For Luke, however, the point is not about the brutality that Jesus endured on the cross. Rather, the focus of the story is what happened while Jesus hung there.

The other day, Linzy and I were out running errands. We had left the house around lunchtime, but I hadn't eaten lunch. By the time we were heading home, several hours had passed. Linzy asked me a simple question and I responded with an irritated tone. She looked at me and said, “You're getting hangry, aren't you?”

Hangry. If you're not familiar with the term, I know you're familiar with the concept. A combination of the words hungry and angry, hangry is the feeling that you get when you skip lunch and then start snapping at people for no apparent reason. If we are honest, I'm sure we've all been a bit hangry at some point.

As humans, it often doesn't take much discomfort to put us in a bad mood. A little hunger, and we start to lose regard for the people around us and focus only on ourselves. And then we try to justify it by making up words like hangry, which has actually made its way into the Oxford Dictionary's online database as an “informal” word, but a word nonetheless.”

When I got hangry with Linzy the other day, I couldn't help but think about the stark contrast between my behavior and Jesus' attitude while on the cross. To say that Jesus was uncomfortable while he hung on the cross is the biggest under-statement of all time. Jesus is being tortured. And yet, we see that he is able to find it in himself to extend grace to those responsible for his pain as he prays, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34a).

This prayer seems a bit odd in some respect. Forgive them, for they know not what they do? How could they not know what they are doing? Clearly, they know what they are doing in one sense. They are killing this man. But they have failed to understand the significance of their actions. They have failed to understand that they are killing the Son of God.

In a similar way, we often fail to understand the full impact of our sin. We fail to recognize that our sinful actions are an affront to God himself; that we are the reason that Jesus had to die; that it was our sin that held him to the cross.

And yet Jesus prays the same prayer for us, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” What an amazing gift that is.

A Fraudulent Savior

While Jesus is on the cross, we see different people respond to Jesus in different ways. The people—the crowds—stand there and watch, waiting to see what happens to this man that has caused such a stir in the city.

Then we have a series of people who mock Jesus. He is mocked first by the rulers — or Jewish leaders — then by the Roman soldiers, and finally by one of the criminals who hung next to him. Their mocking comes in slightly different forms, but they share this in common: they think that Jesus is a fraudulent savior. If he is really who he says he is, if he is really a Savior, then he should be able to save himself! Let’s take a look at exactly what each of these groups say.

Jewish leaders - “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” (v. 35). This echoes the very reason that the Jews arrested Jesus in the first place. He claimed to be the Christ, the Messiah. The one sent by God to save his people.

Why was this a problem for the Jews? Why could they not accept Jesus as the Messiah?

First, the Jews were expecting a messiah who would be a political and military leader who would free them from oppression. They were expecting this messiah to come and defeat Israel’s enemies and establish his own kingdom, making Israel a mighty nation again.

But Jesus was not this messiah. He was not a warrior. He was not a political leader. And he did not come to defeat the Romans and bring freedom to Israel. This

had been apparent to the Jewish leaders for some time, but now, as Jesus hung on a Roman cross, this became especially clear.

The second reason that the Jews could not accept Jesus as the Messiah was that they had no concept of a suffering messiah. The messiah wouldn’t suffer. The messiah certainly wouldn’t die. So for the Jews, the very fact that Jesus was on the cross categorically disqualified him being the messiah. “Oh, he thinks he is the messiah? He thinks he’s God’s chosen one? He saved all of those other people; let him save himself, if he really is who he says he is.”

Roman soldiers - “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” (v. 36).

As the Roman soldiers mock Jesus, they take a political angle. The official Roman ruling was that this man claimed to be a King of the Jews. To these soldiers, this idea was laughable. This guy is a king?? What kind of a king would allow himself to end up in such a shameful situation? Where are his troops? Where is his sword? Where is his dignity? If Jesus were really a king with any of the power and authority that comes along with that position, he should be able to save himself.

But Jesus did not save himself. Instead Jesus hung on the cross. And as the Roman soldiers saw this, their suspicions were confirmed—this man is no king. He is just a fraud.

Next, we come to the first criminal - “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” (v. 39).

The mock of this criminal is along the same lines as that of the Jewish leaders. It seems that he shared all of their same assumptions about what the messiah should be like. He thinks, “If you are truly the messiah, then you should be able to take yourself off the cross, and me along with you!” His motives are clearly self-serving.

All three of Jesus’ mockers—the Jewish leaders, the Roman soldiers, and this first criminal—have concluded that Jesus is a fraudulent savior. He claims to be messiah; he claims to be a king; he claims to be a savior, and yet he can’t even save himself. The fact that he is on the cross means that he must be a fake.

A Repentant Plea

The second criminal, however, sees things quite differently. After the first criminal mocks Jesus, the second rebukes him from the other cross.

Luke 23:40:

“Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”

“Who do you think you are?” the second criminal asks of the first. “Look at us! We are dying here because we deserve to. We are being punished according to our crimes. But this man ... he is innocent.”

The second criminal recognized his guilt and Jesus' innocence. In that moment, he repented and puts his faith in Jesus. He turns to Jesus and says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (v. 42).

This man never asks Jesus to spare him the agony of the cross. Did he want that? Absolutely he did. Every bit as much as the first criminal. He wanted to get down off of that cross. He wanted to live. He wanted the pain and humiliation to stop. He wanted his body to be saved in this life. That's what he wanted. But that's not what he needed.

Rather, what the second criminal needed was for his soul to be saved in the next life. So he makes one simple, humble request, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Nick Vujicic was born in Australia in 1982 with a rare disorder that caused him to be born without arms or legs. As you can imagine, nearly every aspect of life is different for someone born without limbs. As a kid, Nick did his best not to let his condition keep him from having a “normal” childhood. But inevitably, his disability led to numerous physical, social, and mental health challenges, including a severe bout with depression.

From a young age, Nick was taught about Jesus and the great love that God had for him. Despite his disability, Nick was able to trust that God is good. Though he did not always understand why, he was able to accept that his condition was part of the way that God had made him unique, and that God had a specific purpose for his life.

Today, Nick travels around the world, sharing his story and telling people about the amazing God that he serves. Nick has the heart of an evangelist, and because of his disability, Nick is able to share the Gospel with thousands of people every year.

Nick did not choose to be born without arms or legs. This is not what he wanted. It's not what his parents wanted. It's not what anyone wanted.

It is easy to imagine how a sense of bitterness toward God could have developed in Nick's heart. He could have let his condition keep him from trusting in God. “God, if you really loved me, you would never have let this happen. Jesus, if you are really a Savior, then you would have saved me from being born this way. You saved others. Why didn't you save me?!” This was the attitude of the second criminal.

But Nick is not bitter toward God, because he understands that God has given him everything that he needs. He may not have healed his body, but he saved his soul. And, God put him in a position to help save others as well. In reflecting on his disability, Nick said, “If just one more person finds eternal life in Jesus Christ... it is all worth it.”²

Jesus may not always be the Savior that we want, but he is the Savior that we need.

Wouldn't we love to have a Savior who promises us a good health, a stable family, and a fulfilling job? Wouldn't we all want a Savior who promises us a lot of money and a big house and an easy life? On some level, we all wish that God would give us those things.

But God knows those are not the things that we need. Rather, what we need is to be reconciled with him. What we need is a way to deal with our sin so that our broken relationship with our Creator can be restored. What we need is a God who loves us so much that he would die for us, so that we could spend eternity with him.

God may not give us everything that we want, but he will give us everything that we need. The second criminal realized this, so he offered his plea: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Welcomed into Paradise

When Jesus hears this humble request from a dying man, he gives him the best news that he could possibly imagine, “Today, you will be with me in paradise” (v. 43).

Theologians have spent a lot of time debating about this verse. How could Jesus say *today* if it was another three days until he rose from the dead? What exactly is paradise? Is it the same as heaven? Is it an intermediary state? And the debate rages on.

We don't have time to explore all of those issues here, but let me say this: In making this promise, Jesus is giving the man something far greater than he was asking for.

The dying man's request was that Jesus remember him when he came into this kingdom. It is likely that this man imagined this happening at some distant point in the future. "Jesus, I believe that you are a king, and whenever you come into your kingdom, remember me." But Jesus says, "*Today*, you will be with me in paradise." This is not happening some time far off. This is happening today.

Notice, also, that the criminal does not explicitly ask for entrance into the kingdom. Remember me, he says. Surely, this is a plea for salvation, but he does not presume to ask for anything more than that Jesus would remember him. But Jesus assures this man that he is about to enter into paradise.

But the most amazing thing about Jesus' statement is neither where this man is going or when he will be there. The most amazing thing is that he will be with Jesus. This is the true prize. This is what salvation consists of. Not merely living forever, but living forever with Jesus. Not merely getting into heaven, but being with Jesus in heaven.

When you think about heaven, what are you most excited about?

When I was younger, it was the mansions. I would just imagine the massive mansion that I would be living in forever. It was going to have a state-of-the-art home theater, a bowling alley, a pool in back, a big back yard. Man, that was going to be great!

I've heard others talk about how much they are looking forward to heaven because there will be no more sadness or tears. Those are powerful verses in Revelation 21 that talk about God wiping away every tear from our eye. How amazing it will be to have every source of sorrow removed.

But what makes heaven great is not the luxury homes. It's not even the end of sadness. What makes heaven so amazing is that God is there! That for eternity, we get to be in the glorious presence of God almighty, the Creator of the universe, the all-loving, ever-gracious, all-powerful God. That is what makes heaven amazing.

That is what Jesus promises to this man in the last moments of his life. "Today, you will be *with me* in paradise." Jesus offers the same promise to each of us as well.

Eating with Sinners

We have seen story after story of Jesus spending time with outcasts and outsiders as we have journeyed together through the Gospel of Luke for the past 9 weeks. At several points, Jesus was seen eating with these people.

In that day, meals were socially significant times, and you didn't just eat with anyone. Rather, you usually ate with people of the same social status. To eat with someone of a higher social status was very honorable, and to eat with people of a lower social status was shameful.

As the religious leaders watched Jesus regularly eat with sinners, they viewed this as very shameful behavior. What kind of self-respecting rabbi would do such a thing? But Jesus was not put off by this, and he constantly found himself seated at the table with sinners.

The Scriptures speak of a great banquet that will take place one day in heaven. This banquet will be a banquet of celebration for all who have been saved by Jesus. There again, at that table, Jesus will be eating with sinners.

Demon-possessed man. Bleeding woman. Gentile centurion who's servant was healed. Sinful woman who anointed Jesus feet. Zacchaeus, a tax collector written off by his fellow Jews. Prodigal sons and good samaritans. A criminal who repents at the last minute. You and I.

There is no category of sinner who is not allowed at the table. There is no amount of sin that can keep us from this banquet. Rather, the only thing that qualifies us to sit at this table with Jesus is that we accept his invitation.

We have all been invited. Have you accepted your invitation? If not, today is the day! Today is the day to put your faith in Jesus. To say, "Yes, I will accept your invitation. I will accept you. I will trust in you as my Lord and Savior."

Once we have accepted Jesus' invitation, there may be times when we question our place at the table. Do I really belong here? Does Jesus really want me here? We have an enemy who will do whatever he can to convince us that we don't belong and that Jesus doesn't want us. Rest assured, Jesus does want you. Just as he wanted the criminal who repented in his last moments, he wants you. He has saved a place for you.

Our role, however, does not just end with accepting Jesus' invitation. We are also those entrusted with the responsibility of inviting others. We are the messengers that God has chosen to deliver his invitation to a lost and hurting world. We have been invited; now it's time to invite others as well.

Endnotes

¹ Gibson, Mel, director. *The Passion of the Christ*. Icon Productions, 2004.

² Vujicic, Nick. *Life Without Limbs*, <https://www.lifewithoutlimbs.org/about-nick/bio/>.