



As we count down the weeks to Easter we began last week by handing you a nail to help you visualize what it cost our Jesus to go to the cross of us. We said that something of amazing significance happened as Jesus took that nail for us. You see in the Old Testament Isa. 49:16 said that when God spoke about His people Israel, He states "*I have inscribed you in the palms of my hand*". It was the idea that in order not to forget them He would inscribe (tattoo) them on the palms of His hands. However, at the cross something even more profound happened, as the nails pierced His hands, inscribed in the palm of His hands was our name. And as He looked at the scars in His hands He would forever know our names and what it took to pay for our salvation.

Let's go back to the place of the nail again and see what else we can learn from one of the key players as the story unfolds on the hill of Calvary. Let's look at the guy who hung on the right cross. He was in the worst spot in the world at the very best possible time. Our passage this morning is found in Luke 23:32-43. A while ago I did a little writing about what happened that day; listen as I read: After we had hung on the cross for a while the circus began. The Jewish priests started to yell and laugh at him ... one yelled " He saved others let's see him save himself." Another said "Come on hot shot, let's see you pull off a real miracle this time". They reminded me of coyotes nipping at some great buck when it's is too hurt to defend itself. So I was almost pleased to see the soldier put a ladder against Jesus' cross and nail up a SIGN which said THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. When the priests saw it they almost blew every vein in their foreheads screaming at the guard. That is when it HAPPENED. They say that Tragedy reveals a person's character. And what happened next proved I had none. Some might say that the 2 of us on the other crosses may have been good men who just got a bum rap. That, maybe we were patriots dying for some great cause. You need to know that Matthew got it right when he wrote they crucified 2 robbers with him. We were nothing more than common criminals, common thugs. It was Passover with the crowds in the city, the Roman's wanting to use us to remind people how they responded to crime. They chose us to die as advertisements for their views on criminal reform. Bottom line was, sure my dad was a Thief and I had a bad childhood but I had done my share of slitting throats, rape, robbing people and leaving them bleeding in the ditches. I got caught red handed with the goods.

I tell you that because I did something that still shames me, it shows the kind of person I was. After the banner was put above Jesus' cross, the religious types went nuts, yelling and screaming insults at Jesus. All of a sudden the guy on the other cross and I started to join in. Here we were dying, struggling for every breath and through swollen lips and raspy voices we chimed in "Some King of the Jews you turned out to be". Life is pretty tough on Messiah's these days", "How about a little miracle?", "Ever seen nails that size carpenter?". Think about it. Us as dying men hanging on the next cross insulting a

crucified Jesus. Like I said if you want to see the kind of man I was, there I was, using my dying breath to kick another man when he is down.

No wonder the Roman's decided to crucify us and say we deserved to die in this manner. Our only value to society was to serve as a public spectacle, so they could strip us naked to show that evil cannot hide. To nail our hands so people could see that the wicked really have no strength. Even after all we had stolen our hands were still empty, and that we had gained nothing by our lives of crime. They could bring their children and point at us and say, "See that's what happens to evil me, so you had better obey the Roman laws."

Here our muscles were screaming for relief. Nails shooting pain like fire through our hands and legs and yet even the pain of the spikes couldn't silence the bitterness that was within me or the desire to strike out at anything in order to cause pain. Especially when the innocent person could not retaliate.

While I was trying to catch my breath I looked at him. He wasn't much to look at. His body was torn as the whip had ripped the flesh from his bones and His face was a mask of blood. His eyes black and swollen, His lip was split, nose bleeding and His teeth looked loose. The man I mocked was half dead and I felt he had no value at all. That's when He looked down at the soldiers who had savagely nailed Him to the cross, and at the crowd who mocked Him and then He gazed at me and said, "FATHER WILL YOU PLEASE FORGIVE THEM THEY JUST DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY ARE DOING."

That is when the man on the other cross yelled with a contempt, "Hey if you are the Christ save yourself and us."

My partner expected me to chime in but all of a sudden it was like a cold breeze swept across me. And for the first time in my life as I looked at Jesus I was forced to look at myself; to look at who I had become. I was ashamed and disgusted. As I looked up He met my gaze and nodded. Nodded as if He had read my mind and agreed with my conclusion. I can't explain how it happened or how I knew it but at that exact moment I knew He was actually who I had heard them say He was. HE was the Son of God. I was only a few feet away from God himself.

I found myself saying to my partner, "Shut up! Don't you realize what is happening here? Don't you fear God, especially knowing that we are both about to die? You and I are here because we deserve to die, but look at him, look at him!!! This guy doesn't deserve to be here with us."

And that is when I turned my head toward Jesus and said, "Jesus I don't understand all of this but Jesus when you get to heaven remember me please."

He turned in the midst of all His pain and anguish and SMILED. Yes, He smiled and gently said, "HERE IS MY PROMISE TO YOU, LATER TODAY YOU AND I WILL MEET AGAIN IN HEAVEN, I PROMISE YOU THAT".

Here was Jesus pinned by nails to the cross and just moments away from all the sins of the world coming to rest upon Him and He took the time for this thief and

changed his eternity forever. Let's look at some of the profound truths seen in the life and death of the thief on the right.

## **I. The Sign ON the Cross**

The other day as I was reading the events around the cross and a strange idea struck me. It came when I started to wonder how the Entrance Interview went as the thief at the cross entered heaven after dying on the cross. Just moments after his death he opened his eyes in heaven and there was an angel sitting in front of him asking:

Angel: So, Mr. Thief how did you figure out how to get to heaven?

Thief: I just asked Jesus to remember me in His kingdom (by the way where is he? He said he would meet me here).

Angel: I see, and just how did you know He was the King of heaven.

Thief: I just read the sign.

Angel: What sign?

Thief: The one that was over His head. It said, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews'.

Angel: You read a sign and arrived here?

Thief: Well, it was right in front of me, eye level. I couldn't miss it. It must have been written by one of His followers, John (the guy at the cross) or some other of His people. It was sure helpful.

Angel: Nope! It wasn't written by John or Peter, it was written by Pilate.

Thief: By Pilate, no kidding!! I got to heaven with the help of Pilate, go figure.

Angel: Don't be surprised! God used a burning bush for Moses, a whale of Jonah, a donkey that spoke for a prophet and I guess a sign for you. There is nothing God can't use. By the way, Jesus is waiting to see you down that way, just follow the signs.

At Calvary the thief looked into Jesus eyes as the soldier nailed Jesus to the cross and was astounded that he saw no hatred there. He watched as Jesus looked at those who mocked him and then at the thief who swore at Jesus and he knew there was something profoundly different about Him. And then as he read the sign above Jesus' head something deep within whispered, 'the sign is speaking truth; trust it'. And he took a leap of faith and asked, 'remember me when you are in your kingdom'. Somehow as he looked at Jesus on the other cross he grasped the fact that he really was the King of the Jews and therefore had a kingdom to which he was going. And so he asked to be part of it. Jesus' response was, 'TODAY, you will be with ME in PARADISE'. That very day, that is why I believe that when we die, we go immediately into the presence of God and there we will be with Jesus. In John. 20:17 Jesus said to Mary Magdalene (on the morning of his resurrection), "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father". From there Jesus was heading right to heaven to see Father God and say hello to the thief as He had promised. The thief would be experiencing "paradise", which is a Persian word for heaven and means, 'a beautiful walled garden used by a king where he

would invite special friends to walk with him in the garden. Sounds like Rev. 21, doesn't it? This all happened because he read a sign and believed it's words.

When Pilate told them what to put on the sign and where to place it he certainly wasn't thinking it would be used to change anyone's eternity. He was trying doing it:

- i) To say to any 'would be' kings this is how Rome will treat anyone who dares to be a king! For we only have one king and it is Caesar.
- ii) To anger the Jewish priest's who pushed him into making a decision he didn't want to make and by letting them know he would get the last word. Also, he had the sign written in Hebrew (the language of the Jews/priests) – in Latin (the language of Rome/ politics/the law) and in Greek (the language of trade and culture). From God's point of view, it was a message for all people. So all would know that Jesus was dying for all of mankind and the first to be changed by it was the thief on the cross.

Isn't it amazing what God can use in people's lives to bring them to Himself? I know of a lady who saw a rock with 'Jesus saves' on it and became a follower of Jesus. I know that some of you love are C.S. Lewis fans (Screw tape Letters, and Tales of Narnia). He was an Oxford Professor that didn't believe in God. Do you know how he found faith? One day in conversation with a friend named T. D. Weldon who was also an agnostic, who had been studying a theologians defense of the gospels, made the following off handed remark to Lewis 'that stuff of the dying God, it almost looks as if it really happened'. Lewis could hardly believe what he heard. The offhanded statement was so causal that it caused Lewis to consider that Jesus may actually be who he claimed to be. And through his study he became a believer that has had an impact on so many people's lives. So here was a scholar who was led to Christ by one who didn't believe in Jesus. Just like the thief on the cross was led to Christ by a sign Pilate wrote, a man who had Jesus crucified. Let me show you again how God can work. On Wednesday Dorothy Greatrix, who is one of our church members who serves fulltime in an Orphanage called "Foundation for His Ministry". She said that a short while ago a flash flood hit their area and swept through the Orphanage shutting off the electricity and cutting them off from being able to get food and water for quite a while. However, what saved the mission was:

- i) Someone from Brentview had donated a truck and that was what they used to haul the water for weeks to meet their needs for clean water
- ii) Someone from Brentview had donated a Jeep. The Dr. came to Dorothy the other day and said please send a thank you for that Jeep for it was the only vehicle that could get him around to deliver babies, rescue some people and save some lives
- iii) She said and I quote, 'a flour bin that usually would allow them to make 100 loaves of bread seemed to stay full and they made 500 loaves of bread'
- iv) Finally, as she was sharing with me about her passion for getting the Women's shelter going (used to help addicted, abused and battered women

get a new start) she said that so far they had raised \$12,000 and that the head of the Mission said they couldn't start the project until ½ of the money was in place. I turned to her and said, "by the way we have had a missions financial campaign called the BMOF and we have to this point set aside \$16,000 for the Women's Shelter, which by the way should bring you over the ½ way mark you need to get started". With that she started to cry. Just like with the sign at the cross! It is amazing how God works isn't it?

## II. The Sign AT the Cross

Despite the fact that we can see the hand of God work as He used the Sign ON the cross to change the eternity of the thief on the cross or to hear of the way God uses people to make differences in the lives of others. If we are honest, each of us still at times struggles with doubts concerning our faith. Where we say to ourselves at times I am like Thomas I need to go back and place my finger in the nail scarred palms of Jesus so I can know that this faith stuff is really real. I think Jesus knew we would struggle like that so I believed he did 2 things while hanging on the cross to help us keep our faith strong.

### A. Thirst that Comforts Jn. 19: 28

Have you ever wondered why that verse was placed in the narrative of the cross? One reason is because it happened and John who was simply writing down what he had seen. But I think there is a deeper reason as well. Maybe a question will help us see why it is so significant. **Question:** Why did Jesus live as long as he did on earth? Why didn't he just step into life long enough to die for our sins and then leave? Why not just live a sinless week or year among us and then die? **The answer:** So that He would experience life and therefore understand what we go through as we live our lives. For it certainly wasn't that he could do nothing about it? Isa. 44:3 says, "*I will pour water on him who is thirsty*". Ps. 107:35 says, '*he could turn deserts into pools*' and '*hard rocks into springs*' (Ps. 114:8). However, despite the fact that he could have done something about it He chose to experience what anyone on the cross would experience and that included thirst. This had been the pattern of His life, "for in his life he had been weary" (Jn. 4:6), "disturbed" (Mk. 6:6), "angry" (Jn. 2:15), "tired" (Mk. 4:38), "sad" (Jn. 11:35), and "hungry" (Matt. 4:2). Why? So that we would know that He understands what we are going through and know that we can trust Him and take our situations to Him.

**Heb. 4:15-16** sums it all up. So know that the cross reminds us that Jesus understands. He proved that on the cross.

### B. Statements that Confirms

Look again at vs. 24, 28. For right beside the thirst comment Jesus slips another line in to help us. For twice He says, '*so the scripture will be fulfilled*'. It is saying that part of Jesus' reason for saying He was thirsty is because He wanted us to see that His actions on the cross didn't just 'happen', but instead, they were part of a larger plan orchestrated by God, proving that what happened was a fulfillment of scripture and proof

that He was who He claimed to be, ‘the King of the Jews .. the King of Heaven’. You will see that the theme of the fulfillment of scripture is a recurring theme in the Easter story. For example:

- i) The betrayal of Jesus by Judas was *‘to bring about what the scripture said’* (Jn. 13:18; Jn. 17:12)
- ii) The gambling for his clothes was *‘so the scripture would come true* (Jn. 19:24)
- iii) Christ’s legs would not be broken was *‘to make the scriptures come true’* (Jn. 19:36)
- iv) That Jesus’ side would be pierced (Jn. 19:37) and that he would rise from the dead (Jn.20:9) was *‘so that the scriptures would come true’*

Why was Jesus determined to fulfill prophecy? It was because He knew we (me) would struggle with doubt so He wanted to use His final hours to pile proof on top of proof that He was who He said He was.

Actually if you pile the events of the Easter story together with what is written in the Old Testament you will find that details like, He would be betrayed by a friend (Ps. 41:9); that He would be forsaken by His disciples (Ps. 31:11); that He would be falsely accused (Ps. 35:110); that He would be silent before His judges (Isa. 53:9); He would be included with sinners ((Isa. 53:12); that He would be crucified (Ps. 22:16); that He would be mocked by spectators) (Ps. 109:25); that they would gamble for His clothes (Ps. 22:18), be forsaken by God (Ps. 22:10); His bones not be broken (Ps. 34:20) and that He would be buried in a rich man’s tomb (Isa. 53:9), and there are more. During the Easter week 332 prophecies came true like clockwork. And the mathematical chance of that happening is 1x 840, (with 97 zero’s). So, Jesus on the cross, when He was thirty was just adding 1 more ‘trust me’ to the list to help you when you are struggling with doubt.

As you think of the cross this Easter remember when Jesus said *“I am thirty’ he was really saying, trust me! For I have proved that I am able to understand what you are going through. Trust me when you wrestle with doubts about me for even in the last moments of my life I gave you another “as is written in scripture” to prove I am who I say I am.*

### **III. The Freedom OFFERED by the Cross**

Have you ever wondered why Jesus’ cross was placed in the middle of the 2 other crosses? Could it be that he wanted to be near to both of the men to offer them the same gift? That the placement of the cross symbolizes the gift of choice? And that while with outstretched hands he offered eternal life to both of them? He honours their choice to accept His offer or reject it.

Someone wrote, *‘while the one thief made bad decisions in life he is eternally reaping the benefit of one right choice’*. He made a choice to believe in Jesus while the other one did not. There were 2 men of identical background in an identical situation on

2 identical crosses. One prayed, one mocked. One was saved, one was lost. And Jesus respected their right to choose.

Let me tell you about 2 brothers! Edwin Thomas was a master on the stage during the first half of the 1800's. He was a small man with a huge voice who was a huge star. At age 15 he debut in Richard the III and it wasn't long until he became a premier Shakespearean actor. He performed Hamlet 100 consecutive nights in New York and was a huge success in London.

When it came to tragedy on the stage Edwin Thomas had few rivals. Sad to say when it came to his life there was tragedy as well. You see he had a brother, who was also a pretty good actor. One time they even preformed together! Edwin played Caesar and his brother John, interestingly, played Brutus. For you see his brother John, the actor, was the man who in 1865 at Ford's Theatre in Washington climbed into the box seat at a play and shot and killed President Abraham Lincoln. You see Edwin's brother was John Wilkes Booth the man who killed Abe Lincoln.

Edwin was never the same after that night because of the shame over what his brother did, so he quit acting. He might never have returned to the stage but something amazing happened. One day when he was waiting for a train a young man who stood near him lost his footing and fell unto the track of an oncoming train. Without any thought for his own life, Edwin leaned over and grabbed the man by the arm and pulled him to safety. Edwin thought nothing of his action until a few days later he received a letter from Gen. Ulysses S. Grant. Thanking him for saving the son of one of America's greatest hero's. You see he had saved the life of Robert Todd Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln's son.

Edwin and John Booth had the same father and mother, same profession and many of the same passions, yet one chose to kill Abe Lincoln and one chose to save Lincoln's son. How did it happen? The answer is the gift of choice. It is just like at the cross, while neither thief had anything to offer Jesus for their eternal lives. Jesus had with extended nail pierced hands done all He could to help them make their choice.

He had:

- i) Come to earth to taste and understand what it is like to live our lives
- ii) Stayed on the cross to pay for their sins
- iii) Showed by His actions that He cared and understood their needs
- iv) Revealed that He was the fulfiller of scripture
- v) Offered the promise of eternal. And then the choice was theirs. And He respected their choices.

What does the mean to us? We need to read the sign above the cross and let it change our lives and eternities. Realizing that Jesus was willing to struggle with thirst to

prove He is a Priest who understand us, and care for us. And that He is the fulfiller of a huge number of prophetic promises. So we can trust Him enough to choose to ask him a simple question. “*Jesus remember me*”. Knowing that He will gladly say, ‘*Yes, I will see you in paradise*’.

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