

THE WORD OF ASSURANCE**LUKE 23:39-43**

Dr. Samuel Johnson was a great British literary figure. Known for making unique observations, he once said, “Hanging wonderfully concentrates the mind.” In other words, “The thought of getting hung by your neck has a way of really getting your attention!” Well, so does getting crucified. Today, I want you to think with me about two men – thieves or criminals - who were facing the fact of their own death by crucifixion. Imagine this scene with me. Jesus had been tried, beaten, and sentenced to death. Spikes had been driven into his wrists and feet and attached to a cross. He hung there slowly but surely dying. Bright sunshine has given way to a dark, eerie, and overcast sky. Jesus’ enemies have gathered to watch the spectacle. They mocked him, “He saved others. Why doesn’t He save Himself?” The scene is full of hate, scorn, and cruel laughter. But some of Jesus’ disciples are gathered there, too. Most of them are lost for words. Their hearts are broken, their hopes dashed, and their dreams destroyed. They didn’t understand yet why Jesus had to die. They didn’t grasp yet that by dying Jesus became our substitute – that He paid the penalty for their sins, your sins, and my sins. No, at this point in time, it was simply the worst day of their lives – full of blood, suffering, death, and unspeakable loss.

Lent is a forty day period of time leading up to Easter Day that Christians set aside to appreciate more fully the significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection. In the four Gospels, we have the record of seven statements Jesus made as he hung on the cross over some six hours – from the moment He was nailed to it right through the moment He died. So this series of message for Lent is called *Cross Words: Jesus’ Statements Before He Died*. Last week, we considered Jesus’ statement – “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” We called the first cross word the word of forgiveness. Let’s read what happened next today. “I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.” That the cross word I want you to think about with me today. Let’s call it the word of assurance.

There’s great irony in this scene. While it’s full of death, there’s so much here about life. While it feels hopeless, it offers the greatest hope possible. While it’s incredibly sad, it’s also full of joy. While it’s ugly and wretched, it’s also beautiful and wonderful. Only Luke recorded this conversation between three crosses. Matthew and Luke mentioned the fact two criminals were crucified with Jesus, but they didn’t record this conversation. John didn’t mention it at all. Why did Luke think it important to put this dialogue in his account? We don’t know for sure, but there is a sense that every person who has lived, who is living, or who will live in the future is like either the first thief or the second thief. Some people resemble the first thief in their attitude toward Jesus. Other people are more like the second thief. Luke used the canvas of death to paint a profound portrait about life – life offered in Jesus; life given by Jesus. Here’s one lesson that emerges.

REAL LIFE BEGINS BY SEEING JESUS DIFFERENTLY.

These two men saw Jesus very differently. What’s the opposite of faith? One answer could be doubt, but a better answer is unbelief. Clearly, the first thief looked at Jesus in

unbelief. He saw a man who deserved scorn and skepticism. He joined the mockers as they taunted Jesus. “So you’re the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you’re at it!” (Lk 23:39 NLT) Who did he see when he looked at Jesus? He saw a battered, defeated man who claimed to be something He wasn’t. He saw someone who was too good to be true – a fraud, a fake, someone to be dismissed and laughed at. Perhaps he saw in Jesus a justification for his own choices in life. Why not steal, hate, and kill? After all, here was what being good and holy got You, Jesus! A cross! So, he cursed and despised Jesus.

You might be tempted to think, “That thief was one horrible man!” Perhaps, but how sad it is that most people in the world basically share his attitude towards Jesus. He refused to take Jesus seriously. That’s the essence of unbelief, isn’t it? Unbelief is the steady refusal to take Jesus seriously. There are different kinds of unbelief, to be sure. The thief’s unbelief was hostile, angry, and bitter. There are a few people who have that kind of attitude towards Jesus. But it’s far more likely that most unbelief is quite sophisticated, apathetic, and tolerant. Most people don’t hate Jesus. No, instead, most people simply consider Jesus irrelevant to their daily lives. Truth be told, they could care less about who Jesus is and what He did. In other words, they refuse to take Jesus seriously which is – at the end of the day – the very essence of unbelief.

Nothing grieves God’s heart more than when you fail to take Jesus seriously. God the Father considers what His Son, Jesus, did at the cross and the empty tomb to be the most important event in human history. To ignore the significance of what happened there and its implications for our lives is a failure to take Jesus seriously. Let me be specific. When you suggest there are really many pathways to finding God and that Jesus is just one of many good choices, you refuse to take Jesus seriously. Jesus Himself said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.” (Jo 14:6 NLT) Yes, it is narrow and exclusive, but that’s what Jesus claimed about Himself and it’s true. Or, when you reject the explicit teaching of the Bible that Jesus’ death on the cross was necessary to pay the penalty for your sins, you refuse to take Jesus seriously. Perhaps you’re offended by the fact all of us are so thoroughly unacceptable to an absolutely holy God that Jesus had to intervene on our behalf. But if you continue to hold on to the pathetic lie that your own goodness, morality, or effort can impress God, you are refusing to take Jesus seriously.

But refusing to take Jesus seriously can manifest itself in other ways. It can even show up in followers of Jesus in a stubborn refusal to be spiritually transformed. I want Jesus to forgive my sins, but I don’t want to give up those sins. I want Jesus to be my Savior, but I don’t submit to Him as my Lord. I want to be born again by the Holy Spirit so I can escape Hell and go to Heaven, but I have no interest in being filled with the Holy Spirit because it means daily surrender and obedience to Jesus. Was Jesus serious when He said hate is as bad as murder or lust is as bad as adultery? If Jesus was serious, why do we still hold on to our resentments and sinful desires? Was Jesus serious when He said you can’t serve God and money at the same time? If so, how can we explain living in excessive debt or refusing to tithe? Was Jesus serious when He said we must

seek His Kingdom first and foremost? If so, why do seek everything else first – financial security, career advancement, or even “the American dream” however you define it?

Do you really take Jesus seriously? You know God wants you to put your spiritual gifts to use, but you insist on sitting on the sidelines when it comes to meaningful service in this church or out in the community serving others in Jesus’ Name. You know the Bible teaches people who fail to put their faith in Jesus in this life face damnation in a place called Hell. But surely, God will make exceptions for my spiritually lost kids, my lost parents, my lost friends and neighbors! If we truly believed God is serious about Heaven and Hell, all of us – me included – would be on our faces before Him more often earnestly interceding for those lost kids, lost parents, lost friends and neighbors. We’d be praying, “O God, have mercy on them! Use me in their lives. Lord, don’t let them go into an eternity without You.” Yes, the first thief refused to take Jesus seriously. True enough. Are you so sure you take Him seriously or seriously enough?

The second thief looked at Jesus in faith. Yes, he saw what the first thief saw, but he also saw someone completely different. He saw a man in extreme pain asking that those who tortured Him be forgiven. He saw a man whose mental and spiritual anguish far exceeded any physical agony. He saw the God-man bearing away the sins of humanity. Faith allowed the second thief to see beyond the helplessness of a mere man and recognize the sacrifice of a Savior.

What is faith? It’s the ability to take Jesus seriously in every dimension of life. You face the fact of your sinfulness and lost condition before God. As a result, you throw yourself upon God’s grace and mercy. Notice what the second thief said, “We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn’t done anything wrong.” (Lk 23:41 NLT) What’s that? Repentance. No excuses. No rationalization. No one else gets blamed. Notice what followed. The second thief turned to Jesus for salvation. “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” (Lk 23:42 NLT) Is it really just that simple? Yes, because it’s confirmed then and there by Jesus Himself, “I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Lk 23:43 NLT) Ironic, isn’t it? That was the day the second thief died. It was also the day real life began for him. It was the day life began at death. He looked at Jesus in faith and found his Savior and Lord. He took Jesus seriously.

Please remember what kind of person this second thief happened to be. He wasn’t your ordinary, run of the mill sinner. This was a convicted criminal. Human beings had now refused to forgive him or show him pity. He was beyond human help, human salvation, or any human rehabilitation this world had to offer. But his failures and faults were no obstacle for the saving power of God. No one – not even this dying thief – is too sinful for God. The power of God’s grace is able to forgive your sins and change your destiny in a moment. I love that saying, “There is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still.” This man had no opportunity to live a good life and in so doing earn or merit a spot in Heaven. All he could do was just look at Jesus in faith and put all of his trust in Jesus. And it was enough. Praise God, it’s always enough! This man might be the best example in the entire Bible that you, me, anyone, and everyone get into Heaven only because of God’s grace which we access through personal faith.

Do you see the implication? Why, anyone can come then just as you are and know Jesus will accept you fully and freely. Come as a lost, hopeless, and helpless sinner or don't bother coming at all. Some folks think they're just too decent and deserving to need God's grace. Some people are just too respectable to ever repent. They don't need a cross! But then, Jesus was never known as the friend of the respectable, was He? No, He was known as the friend of sinners. That means when Jesus became a friend of Rick Breusch, He certainly didn't do so because I somehow deserved or merited God's grace and love. Jesus only makes friends with undeserving sinners.

Stephen Baldwin is one of the four Baldwin brothers who have all been - or still are - Hollywood actors. His wife became a Christian back in 2000 and told Stephen, "I'm going to be serving Jesus now." Baffled by her conversion, Stephen thought "Who does this Jesus dude think He is coming around here?" Then September 11, 2001 happened and it proved to be a pivotal event in Stephen Baldwin's life. What he thought was impossible happened. He began to rethink his dismissal of Jesus as irrelevant. He said, "It made me say the Bible is true, and Jesus Christ could come back tomorrow." How has his life changed since becoming a follower of Jesus? His work as an actor has largely dried up by his own admission. He won't work in a film that includes adultery, violence, or profanity. He traded in his Porsche for a Chevy Malibu. He now spends his available time spreading the message of Jesus. He directed and hosted a DVD project aimed at reaching young people through extreme sports. As for his marriage, Stephen and his wife have enjoyed a whole new level of unity and oneness. Stephen Baldwin became a new person because of Jesus.

What happens when you really take Jesus seriously? What happens when you respond to Him and His claims in faith? Does your life become problem-free? Heartache-free? Crisis-free? Of course not. Followers of Jesus are people who keep on taking our sins to Him for forgiveness, keep on bringing our hurts to Him for healing, keep on sharing our struggles with Him for help, and keep on presenting our worries to Him to obtain His peace. Nevertheless, a lot does in fact change when you take Jesus seriously. Like what? Your priorities change. Your goals change. Your passions change. You love your spouse more, your children more, your parents more. You begin to see your neighborhood, your school, and your office for the mission field that it is. You even see your church differently. You appreciate the fact that the church isn't about you. It's about worshipping God and letting Him use you to meet the needs of others. Maybe most importantly, you realize the church is just a hospital for hurting people not some kind of spiritual museum for perfect people. All that and so much more happens when you take Jesus seriously. There's a second lesson that emerges from this scene.

REAL LIFE RESULTS IN ENJOYING JESUS ETERNALLY.

"Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom." (Lk 23:42 NLT) What was the second thief asking for? No one is exactly sure. But it does make sense to me that he was simply asking Jesus to remember him sometime in the distant future when Jesus came back as the Messiah, the true king of Israel, and defeated all of Israel's enemies. He hadn't gotten Jesus figured out yet, by any means. I'm quite certain he

wasn't expecting Jesus' response, "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise." (Lk 23:43 NLT)

That word for "paradise" here wasn't accidental. It's actually a Persian word. Apparently, it referred to a private garden surrounded by walls – like the inner courtyard in a king's palace. "Paradise" was this beautiful, restful, and secluded space in the palace where the king would invite his closest friends to come and share life with him. Think about that. Jesus offered this wretched, dying man eternal life, true enough. But what kind of eternal life did Jesus promise? He offered intimate, close friendship with the King of kings and the Lord of lords in the courts of Heaven forever and ever. That's what got offered and that's what got promised. And I'm quite sure that's what the second thief experienced, too. By the way, that's also what Jesus offers to you and to me.

I want you to reflect on who accompanied Jesus into Heaven on that day. This is exciting to me! Was it some great, spiritual man of God like Abraham or Moses? Was it a great leader like King David? Was it a great prophet like Isaiah? Was it even someone like Paul, who became a martyr? No. The man who accompanied Jesus into Heaven on the day salvation was secured for every human being was – at least from an earthly perspective – a loser, a convicted criminal, someone who'd lived a worthless, wasted, and unproductive life. I believe on the day Jesus died He took with Him into Heaven an initial specimen of everyone and anyone He was going to save. Sinners only. It's as if He walked into His Father's heavenly throne room that day – His arm around this second thief – and announced, "Father, I bring a sinner with Me. He's a good example of the rest I will bring with Me."

You don't have to die to experience eternal life. God is life. When you have God in your life, you already are experiencing eternal life at some level. The Bible says, "And anyone who believes in God's Son has eternal life. Anyone who doesn't obey the Son will never experience eternal life but remains under God's angry judgment." (Jo 3:36 NLT) When does eternal life really begin? Not when you die, but when you place your trust in Jesus to get you into Heaven. Death will change how you experience eternal life, to be sure, but it's not when eternal life begins. Eternal life starts when you place your trust in Jesus and the Holy Spirit enters your life.

Every now and then it's fun to look through one of those gifts books you put on your coffee table – the ones filled with professional photos of nature or tourist destinations. For several days this one guy had a book open to a photo of the Grand Teton Mountains. It was an extra-wide photo that filled not only the left page, but crossed the fold and took half of the page on the right. It was a majestic display of deep blue sky; rugged, gray, snow-capped mountains; and a calm lake in the foreground. One morning he decided to turn the page to the next photo, and as he did he discovered he had missed something important. The right page of the Grand Tetons photo was an extra-long page folded over, covering part of the overall picture. So when he opened up the entire picture, it not only revealed what was covered, but added another eight inches to the Grand Tetons photo. In other words, when the man opened

the fold, he added some 16 inches to the width of the photo. Wow. In that moment, the Grand Tetons became even grander.

The Christian life has unfolding moments like that. It happens when we discover there is much more to God and His kingdom than we ever knew. There's much more to his purpose for us than we imagined. Abraham experienced that at age 75, Moses at age 80, and the apostle Paul on the road to Damascus. Again and again in the Bible, when God met people, he opened a glorious page for them that had previously been folded and hidden. That's the kind of life – the kind of eternal life - God offers you and me. Right now. Today. And, yes, after we die as well.

There's a whole lot of life you can experience in this life before you die. You don't have to wait to get to Heaven to enjoy the experience of living in Jesus and for Jesus. The thief who trusted Jesus became spiritually alive the day he physically died. But you've been given an opportunity he never had – to be physically and spiritually alive at the very same time. You can enter into eternal life while you're still living this earthly life. We can and should apply Jesus' words to our lives some 2,000 years later. "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise." (Lk 23:43 NLT) You're invited into a kind of "paradise" even living here on this earth. You can live in a place where you are always totally accepted and deeply loved by the King of kings Himself – the Lord Jesus Christ. It's a place of constant refuge, retreat, and renewal.

Christopher Parkening, considered to be the world's greatest classical guitarist, achieved his musical dreams by the age of thirty. By then he was also a world-class fly-fishing champion. However, his successes failed to bring him happiness. Weary of performances and recording sessions, Parkening bought a ranch and gave up on the guitar. But instead of finding happiness after getting away from it all, his life became increasingly empty. He wrote, "If you arrive at a point in your life where you have everything that you've ever wanted and thought that would make you happy and it still doesn't, then you start questioning things. It's the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. I had that and I thought, *Well, what's left?*" While visiting friends, he attended church and ended up putting his faith in Jesus. He was born again by the Holy Spirit. Parkening developed a hunger for Scripture and was struck by 1 Corinthians 10:31: "Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." He explains, "I realized there were only two things I knew how to do: fly fish for trout and play the guitar. Well, I am playing the guitar today absolutely by the grace of God.... I have a joy, a peace, and a deep-down fulfillment in my life I never had before. My life has purpose. I've learned first-hand the true secret of genuine happiness."

On the cross, Jesus said to that second thief, "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise." (Lk 23:43 NLT) It was a word of assurance. Real life begins by seeing Jesus differently. And real life results in enjoying Jesus now and for eternity.