

The Heights Baptist Church

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS • JESUS AND THE CRIMINAL • LUKE 23:32-43 • 2/14/2021

MAIN POINT

The criminal's encounter with Jesus teaches us that faith in Jesus satisfies our justice before God.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Think about some stories you've heard in the news recently, or things that have happened in your own life. What is one story that has seemed unfair to you recently, and why?

What do we base our understanding of fairness on? Why is fairness something we value?

Sometimes we look at the suffering in the world around us and wonder where justice is. From a very early age, we learn that life is not fair. However, we also believe in a God of justice, so we want Him to deal with the unjust circumstances we see around us. Today we are going to look at a man who encountered Jesus in the hour of his own execution, when he was receiving what his society said he deserved for his crimes. Even in that moment, this criminal understood something no one else did—Jesus had done nothing wrong, but was satisfying even this criminal's justice before God by dying on the cross. This story contradicts our human understanding of fairness and reminds us that Jesus has joined us in our condemnation in order to offer us salvation, something none of us deserve.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ LUKE 23:32-39.

Luke described how Jesus was crucified between two criminals. What might Jesus' position between such people communicate to those watching? Why?

Jesus' placement between two thieves was a position probably intended to disgrace the Lord. But even the position of the cross fulfilled prophecy, since Isaiah had said, "[He] was counted

among the rebels; yet he bore the sin of many and interceded for the rebels” (Isa. 53:12).

Luke included three statements Jesus made from the cross, the first one in verse 34. What does Jesus’ prayer tell us about Him? How might this prayer be a source of hope for us in the midst of despair?

What do you think motivated the thief to hurl abuse at Jesus in verse 39?

From the cross Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing” (v. 34). Jesus’ prayer held out hope for a spirit of repentance to take hold in the hearts of the soldiers, criminals, and religious leaders who mocked Him. They sinned out of ignorance. This emphasized the supernatural nature of a God who can forgive even the most heinous sin. What greater demonstration of grace could there be than for Jesus to ask His Father to forgive those crucifying Him, an innocent man?

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ LUKE 23:40-43.

Initially, both thieves mocked and insulted Jesus (see Matt. 27:44). What did their mockery reveal about the condition of their hearts?

What attitudes might move someone who is clearly guilty to mock and insult Jesus?

What attitudes move people to mock and reject Jesus today?

Being rightly convicted criminals undergoing the just penalty for their sins, these two were utterly hopeless, and their hopelessness drove them to cynicism and despair. Scripture describes Satan as “the accuser” (Rev. 12:10), because while he knows that his defeat is certain, he continues to accuse people by trying to convince them that they are hopeless just like him. We see a similar spirit in the criminals as they initially mocked Jesus in the midst of His suffering. They knew that they were guilty and that their situation was dire, so they mocked the One whose ministry centered on giving hope to the hopeless.

Unlike Jesus, the men being crucified on either side of Jesus were guilty criminals receiving the just punishment for their sins. Why do you think these two guilty men had such drastically different responses to Jesus?

Perhaps it was Jesus’ prayer for His enemies in verse 34, or perhaps it was the way Jesus embraced His suffering, but one of the two criminals radically changed his tone toward Jesus in verse 40. Whatever it was, this criminal’s eyes were opened to the identity and power of Jesus. This hopeless man’s encounter with Jesus resulted in a changed heart. He rebuked the other

criminal, saying, “Don’t you even fear God, since you are undergoing the same punishment?” (v. 40).

According to verses 40-41, what did the second criminal understand about himself? About God?

What can we learn from this criminal in terms of acknowledging our own desperate condition before God apart from Christ?

The man who chastised the other acknowledged, “We are punished justly” (v. 41). He admitted guilt and the fact that he deserved his punishment. Appropriately, this attitude of “owning your sins” is required of all who seek forgiveness. Jesus, however, did nothing wrong. This proclamation of Jesus’ innocence emphasized a key truth of the crucifixion—Jesus died as the Just One in place of the unjust.

The criminal’s admittance of his unjust life is an example for us of a repentant heart. How would you describe repentance? Why does God value a repentant heart?

What did the repentant criminal ask of Jesus? How was faith involved in his request?

How might Jesus’ words to the thief in verse 43 have changed his perspective on his current circumstances? How did Jesus’ words give him hope?

After a defense of Jesus, the repentant criminal made a request. “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom” (v. 42). This man demonstrated a pre-resurrection faith by asking that Jesus not forget him when He claimed His future reign. We cannot know how much this criminal understood about Jesus’ nature, but the repentant man did confess an openness to Jesus’ saving mission. Jesus responded to the man with a word of assurance: “Today you will be with me in paradise” (v. 43). Immediately, the repentant man would experience a full relationship with Jesus. Paradise depicted a place where God’s people will abide forever with Him in the world to come. According to Jesus, this criminal received an eternal relationship with God that day.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

How have you been challenged by today’s discussion about fairness and grace in the kingdom of God?

Describe an encounter you have had with Jesus that helped you better understand how He satisfied your justice before God.

When was a moment this past week where you slipped into thinking that God owes you something? How might you remind yourself today that God doesn't owe you anything?

PRAYER

Thank God for His grace. Ask Him to remind you of your great need for Him and to help you celebrate the eternal reward that comes with knowing Him. Ask God to bring to light any ways in which you push back against His justice at work in the world. Pray that God would help you love others less like the world loves, and more like Christ loves.

COMMENTARY

| LUKE 23:32-43

23:32-38. As Jesus trudged toward the site of crucifixion, two other victims accompanied Him (v. 32). Luke identified them as criminals—literally, “evildoers.” Luke didn’t name the nature of their crimes. Other Gospel writers used a different Greek term for these two that can mean either “robbers” or “revolutionaries” (see Matt. 27:38; Mark 15:27). Appropriately, Jesus spent His last hours in the midst of sinners, the very people for whom He came to die.

The entourage proceeded to a place called The Skull (v. 33). Many Bible students presume that the term rendered “The Skull” (Greek, “kranion,” from which the English word “cranium” is derived) originated from a geological shape that appeared in the side of the hill. The King James Version here uses the Latin term “Calvary” to identify the place of crucifixion. Other Gospel writers also included reference to the Aramaic-Hebrew name “Golgotha” (see Matt. 27:33; Mark 15:22; John 19:17). At this spot they crucified Jesus. Luke provided few details of the elements of crucifixion. He preferred an emphasis on Jesus’ spiritual battle. During a typical crucifixion, death came slowly. The victim could live as long as two days. The soldiers suspended the victim from the cross using ropes and nails. Usually they stripped the person of clothing. Death came from exposure, blood loss, and dehydration. Crucifixion was a painful, humiliating death.

From the cross Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (v. 34). Jesus’ prayer probably was a reference to those present who were responsible for this event—soldiers and religious leaders. He held out hope for a spirit of repentance from them. They sinned out of ignorance. This emphasized the supernatural nature of a God who could forgive even the most heinous sin. According to custom, the soldiers divided His clothes and cast lots. They gambled

away the last of Jesus' possessions. This final insult pictures Jesus giving everything He had in death. Jesus demonstrated the ultimate in forgiveness.

Certain people stood watching as the scene unfolded (v. 35). A crucifixion often attracted curious onlookers. Luke offered no record of their thoughts at this point. The leaders, however, responded in character. They kept scoffing at Jesus. These religious leaders insisted on Jesus' death and got it. But they kept on the attack even as Jesus died. The scoffing alluded to Jesus' claim to be the Messiah. In His ministry, Jesus performed miracles that saved people from demons, illness, and death. In the view of the leaders, then, if He truly was God's Messiah, the Chosen One, why did He not save Himself? They mocked what appeared to be true—the helplessness of Jesus. They looked for a Messiah who represented physical power. They failed to realize that they spoke the truth. He could have rescued Himself from the cross. He refused, however, to use His divine power for selfish reasons. Instead Jesus chose to obey God's call to a different purpose—to give His life in sacrifice.

The mob mentality around the cross dominated (v. 36). Roman soldiers carried out the execution on behalf of the government. They too mocked Him. They offered Jesus sour wine. This cheap drink possibly came as a kindness to the condemned. More likely, however, the soldiers scornfully gave a supposed drink of kings to Jesus, who came to be a King. The inscription tacked to the cross above Jesus possibly spurred their actions (see 23:38). Then the soldiers took up the taunt of the leaders, "If You are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" (v. 37). As He did with the leaders, Jesus made no response to this abuse. He let His actions speak for themselves.

23:39-43. Verses 35-38 describe the ridicule Jesus endured on the cross. Even the dying criminals who were crucified beside Jesus got in on the mocking act as one of them echoed the Jewish cry (v. 39). The Messiah should at least be able to save Himself. While He was doing that, He might as well show His power by saving those who were dying with Him. Surely this criminal deserved his fate, showing his character to the end. Suffering the most insulting of deaths, he hurled insults at the only one who could save him.

The word "rebuked" (v. 40) is the same term Jesus used in casting out demons (4:35,41; 9:42), healing the sick (4:39), and calming the storms (8:24). The second thief thus followed Jesus' advice in an ironic way, catching his fellow thief in a sin and rebuking him. The second thief confessed his sins and invited the other thief to join his confession (v. 41). They deserved to die. They were guilty. As such, they stood in sharp contrast to Jesus. How this thief came to recognize the innocence of Jesus we are not told, but his statement incorporates a great theological truth: Jesus did not deserve to die. He was the sinless dying with sinners, the

innocent sharing the fate of the guilty, the pure Lamb of God taking on Himself the sin of the world.

The repentant thief had rebuke for his fellow thief but a request for Jesus. He wanted to be remembered when Jesus entered His kingdom (v. 42). This thief did not know all he asked, but he had enough faith to ask to be part of whatever Jesus was up to. He had no more life ahead of him, but he sought eternal blessings beyond the cruel death he was enduring. When Jesus raised the dead, some decided to kill Him. When they killed Him, one decided to join Him.

The time frame of the thief's request is not clear, but Jesus' response was quite clear. The thief did not have to wait even one day (v. 43). His faith, whatever its source, secured him an immediate place with Jesus. He would be part of Jesus' kingdom "today ... in Paradise." The expression is borrowed from the Persian language, where the word "paradise" means a park or garden. The Hebrew equivalent appears three times in the Old Testament (Neh. 2:8; Song 4:13; Eccl. 2:5). Here we see a central New Testament text on eternal life. Jesus promised this believing thief that he would share life with Jesus in paradise today. The thief had asked for participation in Christ's kingdom, and Jesus appeared to grant the request.