

“It’s Never too Late” (Luke 23:32–43)

1. The Crime. Greetings! My name is Dismas, which means “sunset” or “death.”¹ I am—I *was*—a criminal—a robber.² I was an enemy of the state—a violent, dangerous man.³ I lived in caves in the Judean hills near the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. My partner in crime, Gestas,⁴ and I made our living by violence. We wouldn’t attack the big groups that passed in caravans for safety. We would rob solitary families or anyone foolish to travel alone. I would brandish a strong staff and threaten my victims with a beating. Most would give up without much of a fight. But I’ve served up some broken bones and gaping wounds in my day. However, one particular mugging didn’t go as planned. A tall, lanky man was traveling alone when Gestas and I jumped him. Much to our shock, this stranger overwhelmed us with his strength. Before I knew it, he had ripped the staff out of Gestas’s grasp. He then attempted to choke him to death with the staff. Instinctually, I struck our victim on the head knocking him unconscious. Gestas then grabbed his staff back and ruthlessly beat this poor man. As we knelt down to steal his belongings, I listened for his heartbeat. I heard nothing. We killed a man! Before we knew it we were caught by a Roman patrol. These soldiers caught us, beat us, dragged us into Jerusalem, and threw us in prison. They showed no mercy—and rightly so—we never showed mercy either. For our crime, we were tried in a Roman court of law. We were then sentenced to death by crucifixion at “**The Skull.**”⁵ You may be familiar with its Aramaic name *Golgotha* or its Latin name *Calvaria*. It’s a horrible place of execution.

2. The Cross. Rather quickly I was hanging on a Roman cross experiencing the most gruesome form of torture known in the world. The excruciating pain and horror of crucifixion is beyond your wildest imagination. Since I know this is a joyous and festive day for you, I will not go into the gruesome details. Suffice to say, I was enduring a form of “hell on earth.” In the midst of my pain, I noticed that Jesus of Nazareth was on the cross between Gestas and me.⁶ I had heard a lot about this Jesus. I had heard that He had performed all kinds of miracles, and even claimed to be the Son of God. But I never gave Jesus much thought. I had never seen Him or heard Him. Furthermore, I was too busy making my living by robbing others of their livelihood. I didn’t have time to consider this supposed Christ. Anyway, Jesus was in the same agony that Gestas and I were. Nevertheless, He cried out, “**Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.**” The soldiers seemed unfazed by Jesus’ heartfelt cry. They just continued to cast lots and divide up His garments among themselves. All at once, the crowd that was looking on began sneering at Jesus saying, “**He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One.**” The soldiers also mocked Him by offering Him sour wine and saying, “**If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!**” As I gazed at Jesus on the cross, I noticed the inscription above Him: “**This is the King of the Jews.**”⁷ As I was pondering this title, Gestas started hurling abuse at Jesus saying, “**Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!**” I am ashamed to admit that I joined in as well.⁸ The pain of crucifixion and the social pressure brought out the worst in me.

After lashing out at Jesus, I remembered the meekness with which Jesus had let Himself be led to punishment. I couldn’t shake His silent strength. I also couldn’t forget His words, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.” I began to reflect on how Jesus had addressed God as “Father,” with an unheard of intimacy. I began thinking about my many crimes and all the talk that I had heard about Jesus. The sign put up on the Cross, “This is the King of the Jews,” burned in my mind and heart. What if Jesus really is the Son of God? What if He really does have a coming kingdom? What if my sin really will separate me from God? As I hung on the cross, my heart began to soften. I realized that this was no time to take a risk. I turned to Gestas and yelled, “**Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.**”⁹ For the first time in my life I admitted that I had sinned. I didn’t just feel guilty; I was guilty and deserved the punishment I was receiving. Now I understood that I was a sinner who deserved to die for my sins. I acknowledged that I was suffering “justly.” I did not attempt to justify myself. I was also able to understand that Jesus was without sin.

After my rebuke Gestas quieted down and the crowd lost interest. I then looked over at Jesus. He was in bad shape—exhausted, in excruciating pain, back oozing, and breath labored. I thought to myself: What savior would wear a crown of thorns matted with blood? What savior would have His beard plucked out by the roots? What savior would die on a Roman cross? Jesus' body was slumped, the nails having ripped His hands and feet. His chin rested on His chest, except when He gathered enough strength to lift His head that He might breathe. It was a horrific sight.¹⁰ While no man ever looked less like a king than Jesus did on this day, I was able to see Him for who He really was. As I looked at the broken, bleeding form of Jesus dying on the cross, God opened my heart¹¹ and I was given eyes of faith. I saw the King of Heaven.¹² Jesus truly is the Messiah, no matter what others have done to Him. The crowd did not catch the point of Jesus' death. All who railed at Him had the same basic premise: If Jesus was to save others, He must first save Himself. I now understood that in order to save others, Jesus had to sacrifice Himself for their sins. His death was not the destruction of His promises to save people but *the means* of it.¹³

3. The Conversation. Even though it's getting hard to breathe and talking makes it that much harder, I looked over at Jesus and called out: **"Jesus,¹⁴ remember me¹⁵ when You come in Your kingdom!"**¹⁶ I didn't say, "Remember my works." I had no works of any kind to offer. I was spiritually destitute. If I was going to you enter into Jesus' kingdom, it would be because of Jesus' work and His work alone.¹⁷ Neither did I say, "Remember my faith—I believed in you when everyone else turned on you." I knew better than to boast in my faith. I barely knew anything about Jesus, but I was willing to step out in faith with what I did understand. Hence, I merely said, "Remember me."¹⁸ I exercised simple trust in Jesus for forgiveness and eternal life, by virtue of His cross. I believed without seeing Jesus walk on the water, feed the multitudes, or turn water into wine.¹⁹ I believed before darkness settled over the land; I believed before the earthquake and before the veil of the temple was torn in two. I believed without the evidence of the Resurrection and the Ascension. I simply asked for grace in spite of guilt. I asked to be remembered at Jesus' return in power and glory.²⁰ Even though I didn't know much, I believed in Jesus' ability to resurrect Himself. I also believed that one day He would resurrect me as well. Since I believed in an afterlife, I guess you could say I had a "resurrection faith."²¹ My story really is an Easter story.

I will never forget what happened following my dying plea. Jesus turned and looked at me with eyes of love and compassion. His words were labored and His lips parched, but I can still hear Him pretty well. **"Truly I say to you . . ."**²² His voice cracks, then, is stronger for a moment. **"Today²³ you shall be with Me in Paradise."**²⁴ Jesus' response confirms that He was the Son of God. Most people who are dying are too busy dying or thinking about themselves to care about someone else. Obviously, this is no time to be saving people! Jesus was a mess! Yet, He gave me an astounding promise! He exceeded my expectations. I had asked that I would be granted life at Jesus' appearing to establish the kingdom. Yet, Jesus promised me *immediate* entry into Paradise on the very day of our crucifixion! Moreover, Jesus told me: "Today you will be *with me*"— "You will be with me, close by me!"²⁵ I could not believe that Jesus could have this kind of love for a miserable wretch like me.²⁶ This was certainly no mere man—what an amazing God!

After Jesus spoke to me, His eyes drooped and He began to fade quickly. But I believed in Him. Yet, I must be honest with you. After I heard the promise from Jesus' lips, later, at 12:00 noon, darkness spread over the whole land. I heard my newly found Savior cry, **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"**²⁷ This was followed by an earthquake and rocks being split in two. **"At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split."**²⁸ As I saw the darkness and was jostled as the earth beneath me shifted; as I heard the cry of distress from the very One in whom I had come to trust, waves of doubt seemed to wash my faith away. Perhaps this Savior cannot save after all! How can He bring sinners into the presence of the very God who now has abandoned Him? How can He speak with authority about Heaven when He apparently cannot control the chaos on earth?²⁹ Despite the frailty of my human faith, in my weakness, I clung to Jesus' promise: "Truly I say to you today you shall be with Me in Paradise." My only hope rested in Jesus' perfect person

and perfect work. I had nowhere else to turn. If Jesus couldn't save me, no one and nothing else could.

Do you feel that your life is beyond hope? Have you committed some sin you believe God can't forgive? Perhaps it's some sexual sin. Or maybe you were guilty of taking your child's life. Maybe you've stolen, or cheated, do you obey or lied in your business or in some other relationship that matters to you. Perhaps you are guilty of a "smaller" sin, but it's one you've committed over and over and confessed hundreds of times. It's a sin God wants you to forsake, but you continue to give in, and now that you've given into it again you believe there can simply be no grace left for you. There is no sin bad enough to make us so depraved enough that God can no longer forgive us.

Let me put it to you like this: If I can be saved, anybody can be saved. If there's hope for me, there's hope for you. If I can make it to Heaven, so can you. If Jesus would take me, He'll certainly take you. Jesus said, "Whoever comes to Me I will never drive away."³⁰ It is never too late— never! *Today is the day of opportunity!* Today is the day to believe in Christ.

Some people see my story as an example of a "deathbed conversion." These folks assume that they can believe in Christ as their life ebbs away. But I can assure you that very few people are saved in the last few hours or days of their lives on earth. Don't delay trusting in Christ as your personal Savior. You do not know the time of your death. Not everyone has a warning; not everyone dies of a terminal illness or remains conscious after an accident. Many people die unexpectedly without so much as a minute to think about their relationship of God. Moreover, most people who refuse Jesus when they are healthy (and young) reject Him when its time to die. With every rejection of Jesus our heart grows harder and harder. Layers of sin and flesh can consume us to the point that it is nearly impossible to believe in Christ. Therefore, don't miss out on this opportunity. Today is your day to believe in Jesus Christ and to settle the matter of your eternal destiny once and for all. *Today is the day of opportunity!* Trust in Jesus today. Make that very same decision that I made so many years ago. You remember that word "Today" right? Jesus said "*Today* you shall be with Me in Paradise."

Perhaps you're already a believer and you assume that my story has no relevance for you. You're not a thief; you're not robbing banks and snatching purses from little old ladies walking in the street. Nevertheless, I represent you. You see, there is another kind of robbery. God gives you life; He gives you talent; He gives you the ability to earn money; He gives you friends; and yet you serve yourself rather than Him. Rather than bringing glory to God, you use your life to unintentionally serve yourself.³¹ This is robbery. You are guilty of a "worse" sin than even me. I committed my heinous sins as an unbeliever, but you are a believer and you should know better. Don't rob God! Instead, recommit your life to Christ this Easter. Ask Jesus to live His resurrected life in and through you. *Today is the day of opportunity!*

Scripture References

Luke 23:32–43

Luke 19:10

Luke 24:26

Acts 2:32–36

Philippians 2:6–11

Hebrews 5:8–9

1 Peter 4:1–2

Study Questions

1. What was I like before I became a Christian (Luke 23:32–33)? How did I view spiritual things? How did I conduct myself? What were my strengths and weaknesses? Why did I trust in Christ? Who shared the good news with me? How long did it take me to respond? What was the turning point?
2. What was the blasphemous criminal's spiritual mindset and attitude (Luke 23:39)? How does this man represent many contemporary unbelievers? What blasphemous remarks do my coworkers and neighbors make about Jesus? Why do they feel this way? Returning to my roots as an unbeliever, how can I relate to their comments?
3. What brought about the repentance of the criminal (Luke 23:40–42)? What is so significant about his rebuke and his request? How do his words encapsulate the gospel? Why is it so important for me to articulate comparable gospel content when I share Christ with others?
4. Why did Jesus give the repentant criminal a promise of immediate assurance (Luke 23:43)? What must this man have thought upon hearing Jesus' words? Do I understand the importance of assurance today? How do I share this assurance and security with others? How does the power of Jesus' death and resurrection play into this?
5. Where is the balance between a sense of urgency in witnessing versus the need to give the Holy Spirit time to work in a person's life? How can I help a person who feels like he/she is too bad to be forgiven to understand that Christ has already forgiven all of his/her sins? How can I help a "good person" to see his/her sinfulness and need for salvation?

Notes

¹ In the apocryphal book the Acts of Pilate 10:2 (often dated to the 4th century), this criminal is given the name “Dysmas” or “Dismas.”

² The term translated “criminal” (*kakourgoi*) is a rare term in the NT (elsewhere only Luke 23:33, 39; 2 Tim 2:9). Mat 27:38 and Mark 15:27 use the word *lestes* (“bandit” or “robber”).

³ See Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*. New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 819.

⁴ Some apocryphal accounts suggest that this was the other thief’s name.

⁵ “The Skull” may have received its identity on account of the shape of the hill or rocks for on which crucifixions were held. It is more likely, however, that the name was probably taken from the fact that this was the place where people were killed in public execution.

⁶ This notation also indicates a fulfillment of prophecy (cf. Luke 22:37; Isa 53:12).

⁷ The custom of the Romans was to attach a placard with the crime committed above the criminal’s head.

⁸ Matt 27:44.

⁹ This exchange is found only in Luke, though it is similar to Matt 27:44/Mark 15:32, where both criminals are said to reproach (*oneidizon*) Jesus.

¹⁰ Erwin W. Lutzer, *Cries from the Cross* (Chicago: Moody, 2002), 59.

¹¹ Most likely in a similar fashion to Lydia in Acts 16:14.

¹² As Tannehill notes, “The criminal recognizes that Jesus’ death is not a refutation of messianic claims but a prelude to messianic power.” Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*. Vol. 1: *The Gospel According to Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 126.

¹³ Bob Deffinbaugh, “The Rejection of Israel’s Messiah—Part IV The Way Christ Died (Luke 23:26–49)” in *The Gospel of the Gentiles*: www.bible.org/seriespage/rejection-israels-messiah-part-iv-luke-2326-49.

¹⁴ Bock notes that the criminal is the only person to address Jesus by His name in the NT. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke Volume 2: 9:51-24:53*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1856.

¹⁵ God insists that faith alone, be the way people are made right with Him for one overriding reason: He insists on getting the credit, or as the Bible puts it, the glory. That’s an important Reformation Latin phrase: *Soli Deo gloria* (“to God alone be the glory”).

¹⁶ Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke*, 535 summarizes the verse nicely: “Some saw Jesus raise the dead, and did not believe. The robber sees Him being put to death, and yet believes.”

¹⁷ Paul says it perfectly in Rom 4:4–5: “Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.”

¹⁸ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Vol. 2. Preaching the Word (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), Electronic ed.

¹⁹ Lutzer, *Cries from the Cross*, 59.

²⁰ See Talbert who cites Luke 9:26; 12:8–9; 18:8b; 19:15; 21:27, 36b. Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 249.

²¹ See also Deffinbaugh, “The Rejection of Israel’s Messiah—Part IV The Way Christ Died (Luke 23:26–49).”

²² The phrase “truly I say to you” (*amen soi lego*) represents Jesus’ most solemn way to reassure this criminal. Plummer observes that this is the only place where Jesus addresses a single person with *amen lego*, though he likes the expression: 4:24; 12:37; 18:17, 29; 21:32. Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke*. International Critical Commentary series (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1896), 535.

²³ The Greek word “today” (*semeron*) is the first word in the phrase. Jesus put it there for emphasis. Literally, it reads “Today you will be with me in paradise.” Meaning, “This very day, the day of your crucifixion . . .” Proponents of soul sleep argue that the word “today” refers only to the time that Christ spoke the words. It is suggested that the thief was not going to paradise on that day; it was just that Christ made a promise to him on that day. Yet, this is illogical. It is obvious that Christ was speaking to the thief on that day. Clearly, Christ was comforting the thief by telling him that they would yet meet in paradise before the end of the day.

²⁴ The word “paradise” (*paradeisos*) is a Persian loanword meaning “garden”—used in the OT to refer to the Garden of Eden. The NT writers use the term two other times as a symbol of Heaven and its bliss—once when Paul referred to his experience of being “caught up to Paradise” where he heard inexpressible things (2 Cor 12:3–4), and also in Revelation as the location of the tree of life from which the overcomer may eat (Rev 2:7). See also I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 872–73.

²⁵ The previous night, Jesus made a similar promise to His disciples: “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14:3).

²⁶ Charles Spurgeon is well-known for saying that this “man who was our Lord’s last companion on earth” was His “first companion at the gates of paradise.” Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Christ’s Words from the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Prentice, 1993), 33.

²⁷ Matt 27:46.

²⁸ Matt 27:51.

²⁹ Lutzer, *Cries from the Cross*, 63–64.

³⁰ John 6:37 NIV.

³¹ Lutzer, *Cries from the Cross*, 56.