

UNLIKELY HEROES: THE THIEF ON THE CROSS

APRIL 9, 2017

INTRODUCTION

A person's last words on earth are often significant. In Jesus' case, he made seven last statements recorded in the Bible: "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*" (Luke 23:34), "*Woman, here is your son...Here is your mother.*" (John 19:26-27), "*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me*" (Matthew 27:46), "*I am thirsty*" (John 19:28), "*It is finished*" (John 19:30), "*Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit*" (Luke 23:46). On Sunday, Joe highlighted the unlikely hero of the thief on the cross, to whom Christ directed one of His seven statements, "*Today you will be with Me in paradise*" (Luke 23:43). The story of the thief is unique in that it encapsulates the redemption story in just a few moments. Where do you stand in this story – are you the first thief, who rejected Christ, or the second thief, who by faith confessed his sin and surrendered to Christ?

GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What is your favorite story about an unlikely hero (fiction or real-life)?
2. Read Luke 23:39-43. The thief on the cross states that "*We deserve to die for our evil deeds*" (NLT). We can all name "big" "*evil deeds*", but what are some of the "little" things we do each day that would qualify as "*evil deeds*"? How can you learn to view your sins through God's eyes rather than rationalizing them as acceptable?
3. The thieves on the cross were there for a reason – they committed a crime (or many crimes). Yet the second thief, after surrendering to Christ as Messiah, was told by Jesus, "*Today you will be with Me in paradise.*" He experienced restoration and reconciliation with God. Have you ever believed Satan's lie that you were beyond God's restorative reach? If so, share with your group how the truth of God's redemptive plan counteracted this.
4. If your life were to flash before your eyes, how would it reflect the redemption story? Would you be able to see times of rejection, revelation, confession, surrender, and restoration?

APPLICATION

Are there sins that you have minimized in your life? If so, confess them to God, asking for His forgiveness. Pray that He would help you become more aware of your sin. If necessary, ask your group to keep you accountable.

If you feel your sins are too great for God to forgive, ask your group to pray that His Spirit will break this stronghold that Satan has in your mind.

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**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

1. Why do you think the first thief was so hardened that he refused to see Jesus for who He really was (see 2 Corinthians 4:4)? Has there ever been a time in your life that you refused to ask or accept forgiveness from someone? Why?
2. What three things does the second thief acknowledge that the first doesn't? How does this fit into an accurate view of God and repentance?
3. The thief on the cross showed an incredible amount of faith in Jesus. Can you imagine how Jesus felt? He was betrayed by Judas, denied by Peter, deserted by most of His other disciples (only John is mentioned at the cross), beaten, jeered at, put on a cross – even His own Father could not look at Him (Matthew 27:46). And then a criminal says, “Remember me when You come into your kingdom.” Look up the following Scriptures and list Jesus’ response to faith (or lack thereof). How do you think Jesus responds to your faith or lack of it?

Matthew 6:28-32

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Matthew 9:19-22

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Matthew 14:25-32

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Matthew 16:6-10

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Mark 2:1-12

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Mark 6:5-6

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Mark 10:46-52

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Luke 7:1-10

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4. What do you think “paradise” means in Luke 23:43? (Note that this word appears two other times in the New Testament – 2 Corinthians 12:4 and Revelation 2:7. It is the same word used in the Septuagint – Greek translation of the Old Testament – for the Garden of Eden.)

**SCRIPTURE**

<sup>39</sup>One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at Him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

<sup>40</sup>But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence?”

<sup>41</sup>We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

<sup>42</sup>Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when You come into your kingdom. <sup>43</sup>Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with Me in paradise.” Luke 23:39-43