

Crucifixion and Resurrection
Luke 23:32-33, 39-43, 24:1-3
April 21, 2019

Last Sunday, we talked about the crucifixion of Jesus. Not about the usual meaning of Christ's sacrifice, but we focused on the form of crucifixion. There were many forms of execution in the ancient world: burning at the stake, beheading, crucifying and others, but why was Jesus crucified? Since Jesus claimed to be the "King of the Jews", he probably was seen as a threat to the Roman government. Crucifixion was not used for common criminals. It was reserved for those who threatened the power of Rome.

The two men who were crucified with Jesus were identified as criminals or malefactors in Luke. In other gospels they are identified as thieves or robbers. However, the Greek word that is translated as thieves or robbers can also mean "insurgents" or "revolutionaries."¹ The Romans called them "terrorists," but others called them "Zealots." They were a part of extreme nationalists. They would launch surprise attacks against the Romans. In other words, they were political prisoners. This explains why they were crucified with Jesus. The three were all seen as threats to Rome.

Last Sunday, we reflected on the nails of the cross, and what it means for us.

Today we will focus on the location of the crosses, Jesus' cross in the middle and the criminals' crosses on each side of Jesus. We will reflect on the meaning and what it means to celebrate Easter.

As you read the Gospels, you notice that what you find in one Gospel you also find it in another Gospel. There are four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The first three Gospels are very similar. That is why they are called synoptic Gospels. John, however, is very different.

Although some things appear in all four Gospels, there are not many. You find the following stories in all four Gospels: Jesus starting his ministry in Galilee; the story of feeding the 5000 men with five loaves of bread and two fish; Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem; Jesus' foretelling of the fact that one of the disciples would betray him; Peter's denial; Pilate's sentence for Jesus to be crucified; Jesus' crucifixion; two criminals' crucifixion; death of Jesus; Jesus' burial; and Mary and others went to the tomb. These are the common things in all

¹ <https://www.newsweek.com/how-romans-used-crucifixion-including-jesus-political-weapon-318934>

four Gospels. When something is mentioned in all four Gospels, they are mentioned because they are very important.

Now, there is something that seems to be insignificant yet it is mentioned in all four Gospels. That is about two criminals who were crucified with Jesus. In our text verse 33 states, “When they came to a place called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.” The criminals, whether they were insurgents or robbers, their crucifixion and the position of their crosses “one on Jesus’ right and one on his left” is mentioned in all four Gospels.

What is so significant about it? Is it even important to mention the criminals? What do they have to do with Jesus’ sacrifice and our salvation? Who were they that all the Gospel writers mention them? What do we know about them? The Bible does not mention their names. Their names, however, appear as Dismas and Gestas in the Gospel of Nicodemus. The penitent criminal’s name was identified as Dismas. By the way, the Gospel of Nicodemus is not a part of the Bible. Historians agree that the Gospel of Nicodemus was written in the 4th century.²

Now, who are they and why are their crucifixions mentioned in all four Gospels? What do they represent in the Bible? Why do all the biblical Gospels mention the location of their crosses in relation to that of Jesus? They all mentioned “one on his right and one on his left.”³

Both Matthew and Mark’s accounts tell us that both criminals reviled and taunted Jesus.⁴ John does not mention about anything they did. Luke’s version however tells us something very different. Luke says that one of the criminals reviled him, but the other rebuked him saying, “Do you not fear God? We are condemned justly, but this man has done nothing wrong.”⁵

Now, you may think there is a contradiction. Two Gospels say both criminals taunted him, while one of the Gospels says only one did.

However, it could be just a matter of reporting the situation at a different time. Both criminals may have reviled Jesus at the beginning of the crucifixion. Then, one of them may have changed his view of Jesus later on because of the way Jesus died. In fact, even the centurion who was there to oversee the crucifixion

² <https://www.gotquestions.org/Dismas-and-Gestas.html>

³ Matthew 27:38; Mark 15:27; Luke:23:33; John 19:18

⁴ Matthew:27:41-44; Mark 15:31-32

⁵ Luke 23:40-41

saw how Jesus died and praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous man.”⁶ His mind was changed. So, it is very possible that Matthew and Mark’s accounts are telling us about what the criminals did at the beginning of their crucifixion, and Luke’s account is telling us about what happened after a few hours.

Please notice that the criminals knew their crimes. Although the Bible does not mention what they did, it is clear that they knew what they did was wrong, and then one of them repented of what he did. These two criminals represent the whole humanity. Some are sinners and some are penitent sinners. Nevertheless, all human beings are sinful and they are represented in these two criminals, one on Jesus’ right and one on his left.

When Jesus was crucified, his arms were stretched out to both sides, one hand pointing to the right and the other to the left. His hands were pointing in the direction of the criminals. As if, Jesus was making a statement, “I am dying for you. My sacrifice is for both the penitent sinners as well as the impenitent sinners. My sacrifice is for the whole humanity.”

However, God’s forgiveness is not accepted by everyone. God’s forgiveness is available for all humanity, but not everyone accepts it. When the penitent criminal pleaded with Jesus saying, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus answered him, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” Jesus did not say that to the impenitent criminal. God’s forgiveness is given only to those who would repent of their sins.

In the same way, the resurrection of Jesus becomes a blessing only to the penitent believers. Easter is celebrated because we have an assurance that the living Christ rules in this world no matter, what happens to us in life.

Dr. Will Phillips is a medical doctor who practices in San Antonio, Texas. He is a dedicated Christian. He had a patient named Edith Burns, who was a wonderful Christian woman. She was one of his favorite patients. She loved to share the gospel whenever she had an opportunity. Whenever Edith met someone, she always introduced herself saying, “My name is Edith Burns. Do you believe in Easter?”

One day Dr. Phillips invited Edith to his office, because he had her lab results. He said, “Edith, your lab report came back and it says you have cancer, and it doesn’t look good. You are not going to live very long. I am so sorry.”

⁶ Luke 23:47.

Edith said, “Dr. Phillips, why are you so sad? God makes no mistakes. You have just told me that soon I am going to see my precious Lord Jesus, and my husband and friends. You have just told me that I am going to celebrate Easter forever. That’s wonderful. Don’t be sad.”

A few weeks later, Edith was admitted in Mercy Hospital. She was on the eighth floor. Since the time she was admitted, she had been sharing the gospel with the patients in the same room and the staff persons. Soon, everyone knew about Edith. People on that floor began to greet one another saying, “Happy Easter” all because of Edith. On that floor people started to call Edith “Edith Easter.”

However, the head nurse on that floor, Phyllis Cross, did not appreciate what was happening there. She did not like the way Edith was affecting everyone. She was hard and cold. She made it very clear that she did not want anything to do with Edith in Room 824. She called Edith a “Religious Nut.”

One day, the two nurses who were to attend to Edith were sick, and Phyllis had to attend Edith. When Phyllis walked in, Edith with a bright smile said, “Phyllis, God loves you and I love you. I have been praying for you.”

Phyllis said, “Oh please, you don’t need to pray for me. I am not interested in religion and I don’t need your prayer.” Edith said, “Well, I will still pray for you.” Edith had such a sweet smile that Phyllis could not be so rude. So, Phyllis said, “Do whatever you want” and she walked out of the room.

Every day as Phyllis walked into the room to do her duty, Edith said, “God loves you Phyllis and I love you, and I am praying for you.” At first it really bothered her, but after a while, this greeting did not bother her anymore. Instead Phyllis began to appreciate it.

Phyllis started to notice that her attitude toward Edith was changing. However, it wasn’t what Edith said that affected Phyllis. It was her positive spirit. No matter what happened to Edith, she was always positive, and always thankful. At times, Edith was very sick and her pain was almost unbearable; but still Edith took it all with a positive and thankful spirit. Her attitude and her strong faith really affected Phyllis and started to melt away her cold heart.

Phyllis wished she had the same kind of attitude Edith had. She wanted to be as positive as Edith was. One day Phyllis said to Edith, “Edith, I really appreciate your positive spirit. I wish I had that, too.” Edith asked her, “Phyllis, do you believe in Easter?” “I wish I can believe it,” said Phyllis. Edith shared the

stories of the passion and resurrection of Jesus. For whatever reason, the message reached Phyllis powerfully. That day, Phyllis received Jesus into her heart, and for the first time Phyllis Cross experienced the overwhelming love of God.

From that day on, Edith greeted Phyllis every day saying “Happy Easter Phyllis!” Edith said, “For believers, every day is Easter,” and Phyllis responded with “Happy Easter!”

A few days later, on Easter morning Phyllis walked into Edith’s room. Edith was in her bed and her bed was raised up. Her Bible was on her lap. When Phyllis said, “Happy Easter!” Edith did not respond. When Phyllis went to check on her, she realized Edith passed away. Her hands were in her Bible. Her left hand was in John 14: “In my Father’s house are many mansions, ... I go there to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to my place, to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”⁷

Her right hand was on Rev. 21:4, “And God will wipe away all our tears, and there shall be no more death. Mourning, crying and pain shall cease, for all former things will pass away.” Phyllis took one look at the dead body, and lifted her face toward heaven, and with tears she said, “Happy Easter, Edith! Happy Easter!”⁸

Christ died for us, so that we may experience God’s forgiveness and love. And Christ is risen from the dead, so that we may live each day with hope and celebrate life with a positive and thankful spirit.

⁷ John 14:2-3

⁸ From James Merritt’s sermon, “*I Believe in Easter*”, www.esermons.com.