

The Three Crosses Of Calvary Luke 23:32-43

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In the latter half of the 1800's there was a small man with a huge voice who was a master of the stage. His name was Edwin Thomas.

At age 15 he debuted in Richard III, and from then on, he became well known as a premier Shakespearean actor. He performed Hamlet in New York City for 100 consecutive nights.

The British critics in London sang his praises. Edwin Thomas was a master of tragedy on stage. Unfortunately, his life was all too similar to his stage persona. Tragedy was his trademark.

Edwin had two brothers who were also actors, John and Junius. In 1863 the three brothers performed Julius Caesar.

His brother, John, portrayed the role of Brutus, Caesar's assassin, which was an ironic twist of fate that foreshadowed what would happen just 2 years later.

You see, in 1865, John became a real-life assassin. On a crisp April night, he stole into the boxseats in Ford's Theater and fired a bullet into the head of Abraham Lincoln. Edwin Thomas and John Wilkes both shared the same last name, Booth.

After that tragic night Edwin was never the same. Shame from his brother's crime drove him to an early retirement. He would never have returned to the stage if it weren't for a twist of fate in a New Jersey train station.

Edwin was awaiting his coach when a well-dressed young man, pushed by the swell of the crowd, lost his footing and fell between the platform and a moving train.

With little regard for his own personal well-being, Edwin locked a leg around a rail, grabbed the man and pulled him to safety.

Amid the sighs of relief, the young man recognized the famous Edwin Booth. But Edwin didn't recognize the young man he'd rescued.

It was only weeks later, in a letter from the chief secretary to Ulysses S. Grant that he learned that He had saved the life of Robert Todd Lincoln, the child of Abraham Lincoln. Booth carried that letter in his vest pocket to his grave.

Isn't it ironic! Edwin Thomas and John Wilkes Booth. One killed the president, the other saved the president's son.

Same father, mother, profession and passion - yet one chose to give death, the other to give life. How could it happen? I don't know exactly, but I can offer at least a broad overview.

It wasn't only one choice that made the difference, but a series of choices, a pattern and direction for each of their lives that determined how they would turn out.

For everything the brothers had in common, the one thing that marked their differences was the path they chose to take with their life. It was the difference between life and death.

This evening, I want us to think about a choice that each of us must make. How you choose will determine the course of your life.

Even more importantly, the Bible clearly reveals that the choice you make will determine your eternal destiny.

It's a life-or-death matter, and the difference in where we end up is determined by the choice we make concerning Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

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Let's begin by looking at the three crosses of Calvary as told by Luke in Luke 23:

Luke 23:32-43, "Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One." The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the jews. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Most of the time, when we think of the cross of Calvary, we're pretty much focused on the cross that held Jesus. However, there wasn't just one cross on Golgotha. It wasn't a solitary crucifixion.

Have you ever wondered why there were two other crosses next to Jesus?

Have you ever pondered the significance of the fact that Jesus was placed in the center, between two thieves sentenced to death for their crimes against society?

Well, I can't say for sure, but it seems to me that the crosses on each side of Jesus represent the ultimate choice that we all must make.

How we choose not only determines the way we'll live our life on earth, but where we'll spend eternity.

On one side of Jesus stood what we might call the cross of rebellion. Verse 39, *"One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'"*

It wasn't enough that Jesus had been convicted of crimes He didn't commit. It wasn't enough that He'd been beaten within an inch of His life.

The fact that His clothes had been divided up among the soldiers and He'd been nailed to a wooden cross seems too much to bear.

But now, He's hanging between the earth and the sky with passersby's hurling slurs at Him. Even one of the men being crucified with Him is ridiculing Him.

It's amazing the depths to which human beings can sink? How many times have you watched the news or read the paper and found yourself shaking your head at the evil that's going on in the world.

Commentators describing school shootings, random violence, and pain that's not only going on locally, but around the world. People frequently treat one another terribly. Bad circumstances are all around us.

We live in a world where pain and suffering, violence and tragedy are an ordinary part of life. If you think that today is any worse than the past, then read your history.

Read about the pioneer days of our country, or the Middle Ages, or the first century, or the time of the patriarchs in the Old Testament and you'll find that there has always been pain and suffering, violence and tragedy.

The Bible offers us good reason for the way things are. We live in a fallen world. Since Adam and Eve chose to disobey God in the garden of Eden, man has been living in open rebellion to His will ever since.

The Bible tells us that human beings are sinful creatures. In spite of what politicians and contemporary philosophers say, humans are not basically good.

Paul wrote in Romans 3 that every one of us has sinned, and our sin mars us at the very core of our being.

The result of sin in our life is that we become objects of the wrath of God. The very nature of God requires that He pour out His wrath on sin.

Listen to what Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:1-3, *“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.”*

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On one side of Jesus stood the cross of rebellion. The thief on that cross refused to acknowledge who Jesus truly was, and the Word of God gives us every reason to believe that this man died in sin.

Jesus said in John 8:24, *“I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins.”*

Now, there isn't any reason to believe that that second criminal, who flanked Jesus on the other side, was any better a person than the thief who hung on the opposite side of Jesus.

Matthew tells us that both criminals were hurling insults at Jesus as they made their way to the place of the crucifixion. But something must have happened to cause this man to change his mind about Jesus.

Maybe it was Jesus' words of forgiveness to those who were crucifying him, *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."*

Maybe it was something that isn't even recorded for us to know, but this man came to believe that Jesus was who He said He was.

When the first criminal hurled insults Jesus' way, this man responded in Luke 23:40b-42, *"Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*

While the first criminal hung on the cross of rebellion, this one changed his mind. His cross might be considered the cross of repentance. While the first criminal died in his sin, the second criminal died to his sin.

Based on Jesus' response to this man, the dark past of this criminal was forgiven as *"Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."*

You know, it's easy to get confused about what gives us an opportunity for a relationship with God. Sometimes we give in to the thought that if only we can keep our nose clean and be good, God will love us.

Other times we hope that our family connections will endear us to God. A very common way of thinking is: *"Grandpa was a preacher so I should get into heaven."*

Probably all of us, at one time or another, have fallen into the trap of believing that by doing good things God will take notice and let us into heaven.

The criminal on the cross of repentance reminds us that it's not who we are or what we've been that gets us into heaven. We're given passage into heaven based on how we're related to Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

No other standard is applied. Trust in Jesus and you get to go to heaven. Reject or ignore Him, and the wrath of God remains on you. It all boils down to that.

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Even though we've spent a lot of time talking about the cross on the right and the left, don't forget the cross in the middle.

While the one cross is the cross of rebellion and the other the cross of repentance, it's the cross of Jesus that's the cross of redemption.

While the one criminal died in his sin, and the other died to his sin, only Jesus was able to die for sin, and He was willing to do that for our sake.

John 10:17-18, "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

You see, it's possible to mistakenly believe that Jesus was just some poor stiff caught up in a bad situation. An innocent man who was killed for crimes He didn't commit, but that's a false idea.

The Bible teaches that Jesus willingly submitted to death in order to accept the penalty for our sin.

Jesus was the Son of God with all the power in the universe at His disposal. He could have stepped down from that cross, but He willingly gave His life, it wasn't taken from Him.

1 Peter 2:24, *"He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed."*

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Conclusion

We're gathered together this evening to celebrate and sing about the Good News that Jesus Christ loved us enough to give Himself on the cross of redemption.

Because of that cross, the one in the middle, we all face the same choice those two criminals had. So, with which one can you identify?

Are you among those who identify with the cross of rejection? Maybe you've never been openly belligerent toward Jesus, but you've never submitted to His Lordship.

The Bible clearly states that those who don't have a saving relationship with Jesus will suffer the consequences of that rejection for eternity. The result of being in sin is receiving the wrath of God.

The Bible portrays that as a painful eternity, marked by weeping, gnashing of teeth, and fire. The cost of facing death without a relationship with Jesus Christ is dreadful.

Thankfully, because of Jesus' love for us, we have a choice. It's a choice that'll not only fill our days with meaning but will fill our eternity with joy and privilege.

It's not something that we deserve, but something offered freely by the love of God for those who will repent, confess and obey Jesus.

The question now is, which response to Jesus have you chosen, rejection or repentance?