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Sermon: March 20, 2011
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“YOU WILL BE WITH ME”
Luke 23:39-43**

■ **“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”** (Luke 23:32-33).

These evil-doers are utterly devoid of hope.

☠ They have no bodily hope for survival. Their fate was sealed the moment those spikes were hammered through their wrists and ankles. Sure, they might hang on for several hours (even longer, if the soldiers do not hasten the process by breaking their legs); but death is a foregone conclusion. Ask anyone, and they will tell you: No one lives through a Roman crucifixion. They are goners.

☠ They have no moral hope for reform. {Jer 13:23} **“Can a... leopard [change] its spots?”** It is too late to change their ways, too late to make amends, too late to seek reconciliation. They cannot climb out of the pit of depravity they have dug: it is too deep. Ask anyone, and they will tell you: Crime is not merely what they have done, it is who they are. They are rotten through and through.

☠ They have no spiritual hope for redemption. The law is clear: {Dt 21:23} **“anyone who is hung on a pole is under God’s curse.”** And what will the King say on the Day of the LORD? {Mt 25:41} **“Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire.”** Ask anyone, and they

will tell you: God is not about to give these criminals a second chance. They are lost causes.

☑ Dante won’t write the Inferno for another 1300 years, yet the words he visualizes inscribed over the gates of hell are appropriate:

**I AM THE WAY INTO THE CITY OF WOE.
I AM THE WAY TO A FORSAKEN PEOPLE.
I AM THE WAY INTO ETERNAL SORROW...
ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE.**

If Hell is the place without hope, each of these men has got a foot firmly planted on the threshold. Sin opened the door, and death will drive them all the way in. Imagine the terror, anger, regret, and anguish consuming their souls, clouding their minds, coursing through their bodies! No wonder these {Mt 27:44; Mk 15:32} **“robbers who ...also [heap] insults on”** Jesus.

Then something amazing happens: one of these men who has been {Is 9:2} **“walking in darkness [sees] a great light”!** This sinner has long been in the place {NLT} **“where death casts its shadow” “of deep darkness”** – a **“shadow”** of his own making – yet **“a light... [dawns]”** on him! The darkness has all but choked the life out him – but then, to his surprise, a {Jn 1:5, NLT} **“light shines through the darkness,”** a light that **“the darkness”** of his worst sins **“can never extinguish.”**

☐ Please turn to Luke 23:39-43. These verses record Christ’s second word from the cross.

“One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: ‘Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’”

Spoken with a different tone, these words might qualify as a prayer of faith. But this is the sneering insult of disbelief. As this man stares into the gaping jaws of death, all he sees is his life slipping away and everlasting torment in hell. He has no confidence that Jesus can save him.

“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.’”

This sinner realizes that he has earned not only crucifixion, but even damnation. He also sees that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, and is well-able to save. And so he asks, without an iota of presumption, in a tone of humility: **“remember be.”** Sometime in the last few minutes, between the moment **“he also heaped insults on”** the Messiah and this conversation, he passed from darkness into light.

His is the voice of true hope – hope that does not disappoint. The Lord Jesus answers with these most reassuring words: **“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”**

Let’s set this in context.

Jesus is impaled on a cross with spikes that pierce his wrists and ankles. {Mt 27:26} Due to the severe flogging he received prior to the crucifixion, the flesh of his back is like raw hamburger. {Mt 27:30} He was also beaten with a staff, so his face is bruised. {Mt 27:29} His head is bleeding from the “crown” of twisted thorns that the soldiers shoved onto it.

The physical trauma is extreme. Barring divine intervention, Jesus will die. Ask anyone, and they will tell you: There is no bodily hope for survival.

At the top of a cross is a sign {Jn 19:20} **“written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek”**: {Lk 23:38} **“THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.”** It draws attention to a litany of harsh realities: the cross is Jesus’ only throne, the thorns his only crown, and his naked skin his only royal robe. It serves to underscore the attributes of his subjects (few, pathetic and defeated), his lands (imaginary), his treasury (empty), and his armies (non-existent).

The Jesus Movement is broken. Political independence, economic revitalization and religious revival are dead in the water. Ask anyone, and they will tell you: There is no moral hope for Jesus to reform Israel.

And remember: {Dt 21:23} **“anyone who is hung on a pole is under God’s curse.”** Whatever else one might have thought about Jesus before today, most first century Jews agree that dying on a cross is irrefutable evidence that a person is being {Is 53:4} **“punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted”** by heaven.

Jesus’ rejection by the religious establishment and his crucifixion give credibility to the claims that he is a {Lk 5:21} blaspheming {Mt 9:34} servant of the devil. Ask anyone (other than his disciples), and they will tell you: There is no spiritual hope for redemption for, or in, this Jesus.

Jesus of Nazareth is, by all appearances, a hopeless case. Yet this criminal next to Jesus testifies that though {Is 53:3} **“despised, and held in low esteem,”** Jesus is the Messiah. He testifies that though Jesus is {Is 53:9} **“assigned a grave with the wicked,”** he is the promised Deliverer. He testifies that though it is {Is 53:10, 5} **“the LORD’s will to...cause [Jesus] to suffer”** it is **“for our transgressions”** that **“he [is] pierced,”** it is **“for our iniquities”** that he is **“crushed.”** Every fiber of this man’s being proclaims with joy that there is real hope, it is available to everyone, and it is found in Jesus – even as his life bleeds away on a cross!

How can he do this, from a cross of all places?

☉ **1st, he kills his false hopes.**

God created food, drink, romance and sex to sustain our bodies and nourish our souls. But some rely on these gifts for ultimate security, joy and significance. That is false hope! Such people fall prey to sensuality, gluttony, sexual sin and addiction. If they are religious they get caught up in sentimental faith that prioritizes powerful emotion to the neglect of truth. Scripture calls this {1 Jn 2:16} **“the cravings of sinful people.”**

God intends physical things to supply our needs and give legitimate pleasure. But some rely on money and possessions to provide ultimate security, joy and significance. That is false hope! Such people fall prey to materialism, greed and envy. If they are religious they get caught up in the so-called “prosperity Gospel”. Scripture calls this {1 Jn 2:16} **“the lust of the eyes.”**

God created us with some strength, wisdom, knowledge, ingenuity, talents, and skills. But some

rely on the self to provide ultimate security, joy and significance. That is false hope! Such people fall prey to self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and the will to power. If they are religious they get caught up in legalism or moralism. Scripture calls this {1 Jn 2:16} **“the pride of life.”**

Our brother in Luke 23 has broken free from all this. He suddenly realizes that pleasure, possessions and power do not provide ultimate security, joy and significance – not when you are nailed to a cross, not when the earth quakes, not when your body is ravaged by cancer.

A disaster of that magnitude should not be required to open our eyes to the fact that {1 Jn 2:16-17} **“the world and its desires pass away.”** The cross of discipleship can be sufficient to clarify our vision. We can {Lk 9:23, 25} **“deny ourselves”** and our false hopes **“and take up [our] cross daily and follow JesusWhat good is it for [us] to gain the whole world,”** to achieve all our false hopes **“and yet ...forfeit [our] very self?”**

Our brother on the cross kills his false hopes.

☉ **2nd, he embraces Jesus.**

Many do not do this even when their lives fall apart. They just lean harder on the old false hopes, come up with new ones, or reject hope all together.

Not our brother; he turns to the Messiah in trust. {1 Pe 1:3-4} **“In his great mercy” “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus”** gives him (and all who embrace the Son) **“new birth into a living hope”** and **“an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.”**

The inheritance will not be fully realized until our bodies are resurrected in eternity. Nevertheless, {Heb 6:19} **“We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure,”** right here and right now.

The anticipation of being with Jesus in paradise probably did not alleviate our brother’s pain or his other physical symptoms. But surely it calmed his mind, comforted his soul, and gave him courage to endure suffering in a way that glorified God.

I am looking forward to meeting this man! His downward spiral of sin and crime culminated in crucifixion; yet, before the end he killed false hope and embraced Jesus!

But the hero of this biblical narrative (and all others) is God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And so I close with **Romans 15:13: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”**