

A children's Bible called *The Jesus Storybook Bible* has a wonderful way of summarizing the Gospel of Jesus. It is as follows:

This is how God will rescue the whole world [Jesus says]. My life will break and God's broken world will mend. My heart will tear apart—and your hearts will heal ... I won't be with you long. You are going to be very sad. But God's Helper will come. And then you'll be filled up with a Forever Happiness that won't ever leave. So don't be afraid. You are my friends and I love you.

... [**PAUSE**] ... When the acclaimed theologian and author N.T. Wright was asked what he would tell his children on his deathbed he simply said, "Look at Jesus." Then he explained why:

The [Person] who walks out of [the pages of the Gospels] to meet us is just central and irreplaceable. He is always a surprise. We never have Jesus in our pockets. He is always coming at us from different angles ... If you want to know who God is, look at Jesus. If you want to know what it means to be human, look at Jesus. If you want to know what love is, look at Jesus. And go on looking until you're not just a spectator, but part of the drama that has him as the central character.

... [**PAUSE**] ... We are winding down our study through the Gospel of Luke which has had us "Look at Jesus." Here in the 23rd chapter we see Him on His way to Golgotha to die on the cross of Calvary. The slow journey (sometimes called the Via Dolorosa) is a strong picture of His love.

Last week was the first of a two-part series that I am calling "*Doubting Jesus' Love*." I am calling it this because not only do we have such a clear picture of Christ's love... but Gospel writers also put-in some internal verification so that we can know this is all **true**. It happened. The love of Christ is real. We do not **need** to doubt it.

As Jesus was marched to His crucifixion... He encountered four groups of people – beginning with Simon of Cyrene. We looked at the verses which deal with this encounter last week. Matthew... Mark... and Luke all wrote about Simon of Cyrene in such a way that any ancient stories that are false would never do. First of all... Matthew... Mark... and Luke... give us the exact name of some passer-by... who the Romans just happened to force into carrying the crossbeam of Jesus' cross. The seemingly unimportant detail of his exact name... provides us with some internal evidence of these Gospel writer's truthfulness. Why do all three Gospel's mention Simon by name... without any further explanation of who he was? False writers don't throw in details like this... and then offer no reason for its importance.

Well... as we saw last week... it turns out Simon of Cyrene probably became a Christian... a pillar of the church... and is the same person that Paul would write about 40 years later in his letter to the church at Rome. He was the father of Alexander and Rufus – who everyone in the church knew. Matthew... Mark... and Luke did not need to explain to their original readers who Simon of Cyrene was. (You know) It astounds me how the Bible contains a lot of internal verification marks – for those who have the eyes to see... and the ears to hear.

Today we will continue to look at Jesus... as He encounters two more groups of people – to whom He demonstrates an incredible love. Let's get started...

Luke 23:32-34

After delivering His gracious prophecy to the Daughters of Jerusalem... to warn them that they are about to experience a harsh judgment on them...

(that they too are under a sentence of death)... and in need of understanding their own condition... Jesus turned and shuffled along the winding Road of Sorrows to the appointed place. Luke wastes no words. Once they reached Golgotha (the place called “the Skull”)... Simon the Cyrenian (at last) was allowed to cast the heavy crossbeam to the ground. Jesus was then thrown upon it... and spikes were driven through His hands. ... The crossbar was raised by the four soldiers with Jesus dangling from it... and fastened to the single standing post. Jesus’ feet were nailed... probably with a single spike, to...the post. ... Jesus began His agonized prayers as He struggled upward for breath and slumped downward again in exhaustion.

Not for a single moment did Jesus give way to the excruciating pain that now assailed every nerve and fiber of His body. His first thought (however) was for others. Verse 34 - *And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*

I am reading from the English Standard Version of the Bible... which has “*And Jesus **SAID**...*” ... This is an unfortunate translation. In the Greek Luke wrote it in the imperfect tense - which (in English) would be **MORE LIKE**: “*And Jesus **was saying**...*” (You see) the way that Luke actually wrote it ... suggests that Jesus was praying this **all through the process** – not just this once. I have been calling this “the thought thread” through each of Jesus’ encounters. Last week when we were looking at Jesus encountering Simon the Cyrene... and then the Daughters of Jerusalem... I mentioned this was the common thought-thread. (You might have wondered... but now you know why.) The thought-thread through each encounter is “*Father, forgive them. They don’t have a clue.*”

The amazing initial (and enduring) reflex of Jesus' heart while He was in agony... was to forgive. ... This is amazing... astounding love! Even as His hands and feet were being nailed to the cross... while His blood splattered the soldiers... and as they callously gambled for His clothes...
"Father... forgive them!"

By offering this prayer... Jesus was fulfilling prophecy.

Isaiah 53:12 (ESV)

¹² Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

Isaiah 53 is POWERFUL internal evidence that the Bible is true... and that we can believe the accounts about Christ's love. 700 years prior... the prophet said that Messiah would be killed between two criminals. ... Someone might say... "Well... Jesus knew the prophecy about praying for His enemies... He self-enacted it's fulfilment..." But Jesus had no control over so much of what Isaiah 53 predicted (such as being crucified between two criminals.) (And) Jesus fulfilled all the prophecies in Isaiah 53.

Luke 23:35

Did you notice that the Jewish religious leaders (actually) took the lead in mocking the Messiah Himself...? First... He was mocked by *the Hebrew Leaders*. They mocked Him as *Savior*. ... The Roman soldiers... having nailed Him to the cross... were now callously casting lots for Jesus' clothing - indifferent to the chorus of cries and calls that swept and swirled around from the national leaders. They were more intent on the roll of the

dice than on anything else. The horrific screams of anguish and the fearful curses were all in a day's work for them.

But far worse than the soldier's indifference – must have been the rulers who derided Jesus... - I think that those leaders ***did*** know what they were doing. They hoped to incite the multitudes who had followed Jesus and gathered at the cross.

Gazing up at the dripping gore... the Jewish leaders led the mockery amidst a people who now stood mute and sympathetic. Verse 35 says “The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One’ ” ...

They did not even realize how their taunt was an unwitting echo of King David's prophesy in Psalm 22:6–8:

Psalm 22:6-8 (ESV)

⁶ But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people. ⁷ All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads; ⁸ “He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!”

Their heartless cynicism had been predicted by David 1,000 years before that day! God leaves us with a lot of internal evidence for believing the accounts of Jesus!

Notice – also – that the rulers admitted (at the foot of the cross) that “He saved others.” ... That was an ironic admission! The evidence for Jesus saving others was massive — the incredible healing of the paralytic in Capernaum... the restoration of sight to the blind man in Jericho... the

raising of the widow's son and then Lazarus... the calming of the sea. They **KNEW** what they were doing... But none of this mattered to them.

The only thing that would convince them (they inferred)... would be a supernatural loosening from the nails that impaled Him. If He would only come floating down from the cross... like a levitating spook — saving Himself — they would have believed - they **said**. Then they would believe that He was the “Christ of God.”

The very fact that *they had gotten Him onto a cross* settled it for them. Doesn't Deuteronomy 21:23 *clearly say*: “*anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse*”...? ... This was the lowest humiliation — to Jews it was *madness* to suppose that anyone crucified - could be **God**. ... Oh! How they howled their mockery! ... And what did Jesus say amidst all this?

Not a word.

Luke 23:35-38

Obviously... the soldiers found the leader's logic credible and joined in the mockery. They united in the cruel chorus of taunts while (ironically) offering kindness in the form of “sour wine.”

Luke strings these images together to underscore the apparent contradiction of the Messiah falling prey to the enemies of God and then succumbing to death. In the popular mind... this should not have been possible. ... After all... how can a dead savior save His people? ... How can a dead Messiah lead His nation to greatness? ... How can the kingdom of God come to earth if its King lies cold in a grave?

But Luke highlights one individual who didn't accept the conventional wisdom - that the Savior's death disproved His messianic identity. ... While one criminal beside Jesus joined the growing chorus of taunts... the other "rebuked" his associate.

Luke 23:39-42

This man admitted his own guilt and affirmed the innocence of Jesus. ... In a remarkable expression of faith... the criminal accepted the absurd notion that death on a cross didn't preclude Jesus from becoming the King of God's kingdom. ... Furthermore (knowing he himself would soon die) this man asked to become a citizen of Jesus' kingdom.

He recognized the deity of Christ. He was the most unlikely person in the most unlikely place for the most unlikely purpose! One hanging on an accursed cross in excruciating pain... uncomplaining... freely forgiving — who could He be but *God*? ... It was a marvelous confession — God! ... In the same condemnation! It was incredible — but it was true. There was no other explanation. Who but God (manifest in flesh) could exhibit such triumph in the face of such torment?

Now... a good theology not only sees sin for what it is... but it sees God for who He is. He asked "*Do you not fear God?*" Such fear knows that He is a holy God - Who will punish sin. ... A healthy fear of a holy God is the beginning of knowledge.

(OK)... So... when we talk about the fear of God... what do we mean by the fear of God? ... Does that mean that we dread God? ... No.

An electrician has a fear of electricity. Now it doesn't mean that he dreads electricity. But he knows that when he's handling those wires... he must be careful or he can kill himself. A pilot has a respect for the power of gravity.

The college where I teach in Bend has a large aviation program. Many of my students are commercial and helicopter pilots in training. They have a saying that goes like this: "*There are two kinds of pilots: there are old pilots and there are bold pilots; but there are no old, bold pilots.*"

What do they mean by that? ... It means that once a pilot has been at it for a long time... they have a healthy respect of gravity. ... No pilot *that I know of* - fears gravity. ... But they all know that it can destroy them.

A. W. Tozer said this: "The fear of God is love on its knees." What does THAT mean? (LISTEN!) — "*No one can know the true grace of God who has not first known the fear of God.*" Some Folks who have been in the church *for years* – do not know and appreciate the grace of God... because they never had a healthy fear of God. ... [P A U S E] ...

Luke 23:34

The suffering Savior was no longer silent. ... Jesus answered him!

One of the thieves said the same thing as the Jewish leadership and soldiers: "*Save yourself ...*" To most people this makes perfect sense...

There (really does) seem to be great logic here.

Common! ... This is your hour. ... Exercise your power! ... You've been telling us you're a king. You've been telling us you're this great hero. You've been telling us you're the great Savior. Okay. If not now... when? This is your moment. If you're the king... come on down. If you're the king... come on off."

He doesn't (even) answer them. And they cannot even BEGIN to comprehend a Savior who comes in weakness. They don't get it. They don't see it... because they're like the daughters of Jerusalem in a sense... and that is they don't see they're sentenced. ... Therefore... they don't see any need for anyone to die for them. ... What they want is an example as a Savior. ... What they want is a helper as a Savior. ... They want a conquering general. ... They don't need (according to what they think) someone to die for them. They don't need someone to come in humble meekness...

"If you're the Christ (the messianic king)... there is only **ONE** WAY I'll know. Save yourself and us."

(NOW – LISTEN!)... Here's what I would like to suggest to you: virtually everybody listening to me right now... has prayed this prayer at one time or another (maybe even often.) Whether you consider yourself a Christian or you don't consider yourself a Christian... you've probably prayed this prayer.

Regardless of what your religious background is... something goes wrong in your life... and impulsively we say: "*If You are real God... here is how I'll know you're there. Get me out of this.*" ... Just like the thief... everybody has prayed this prayer. "*If you're there ... God!*" ... You might have been in the hospital... somebody in your family may have been dying. Financial problems may have overwhelmed you. ... "*God! If You're there... Get me out of this!...*"

Someone might even be listening to me right now who is a skeptic or on the verge of turning completely away from Christianity... because you prayed that prayer and Jesus didn't answer it.

Notice (please) verse 39 where Jesus prays the prayer. ... "One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But Jesus never answers him. He doesn't say anything in verses 40 or 41. He never says a thing.

He doesn't answer the people on the ground either. All Jesus says is: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." ... Here's why. They don't see the only hope they have is.. IF HE STAYS THERE. They don't see it. ... The only hope they have is if Jesus stays up there on the cross.

There are very real problems with our praying: "*Here's how I'll know you're God - My life must go the way I know it needs to go ...*"

Here are the problems. ... First... It assumes that I know how my life needs to go. ... Secondly... It assumes if there is a God... He must not have any greater wisdom... but share this wisdom that I know." ... Thirdly... it assumes if He's not making my life go according to my wisdom... He's either a bad God... or no God. ... Boy! How arrogant we are!

We (simply) cannot look at a situation and say, "*No good can come out of that - because I don't see any...*" "The Creator of the Universe's insight and wisdom is no greater than my own..." ... Those who were at the cross that day thought the best was for Christ to come down...

(O.K. ... Time for some honest humility)... You have no idea how your life ought to go. You have no idea... The thief says: "*Come down.*" He is

operating from the only hope he has in the whole world (the only hope any of us have) ... He says: "*I know how life has to go...*"

But what the other thief does... is he shows the signs of spiritual awakening. First of all... he looks over and says: "*We deserve what we're getting.*" ... The unrepentant thief (even though he had broken the laws) wants to get off. ... But the second thief says: "*I deserve what I'm getting...*" (He confesses his sin.) Secondly... he says (and this is amazing) - "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*"

Would you think about this for a second? ... He believes there's a future for Jesus. Who else in the world WOULD at that point? ... Jesus is dying on a cross!!!

Do you realize what he's saying? He says, "... remember me when you come into your kingdom." What kingdom? What future? Somehow this thief perceived Jesus was a door into the kingdom of God. ... He perceived the gospel.

What is the gospel? The gospel is not that I work... follow the example of Jesus Christ... and then He blesses me. ... No. The gospel is that I am sentenced... and I am lost... and my sentence would be final... except it fell onto Christ. ... I can only be saved by admitting that I can't save myself. ... I need Jesus.

He doesn't ask for paradise. He doesn't ask to get off the cross. He just says, "*I don't know. I don't understand. I just want to be – WITH YOU!*"

The repentant thief asks: "Remember me." Here's the mark of the difference between the spiritually thick-headed... and the spiritually awakened. The penitent thief and the un-repentant thief are different in this

sense: the un-repenting thief says, *“I want you to save my skin - not my soul”*... and the penitent thief says: *“I don’t care about my skin; just save me.”*

Most of us are like this. We start as the un-repenting thief... and eventually (hopefully)... we become penitent. Most of us come to God saying, *“I have a problem. I have to do something about the problem,”* but if the Spirit of God opens our eyes... we start to say: *“I deserve my problems... What I really need (Jesus) is You.”*

A condemned criminal understood this! Of all the people on hand that day this very bad man comprehended the Gospel truth that was alluding all those who mocked. ... **[P A U S E]** ...

Have you ever imagined yourself to be beyond God’s love and grace? ... Have you been caught-up in sin so unspeakable that if others knew – you’d be certain they’d throw you right out of this church...? ... Let me tell you that the only thing that will put you beyond any hope – would be to treat Jesus like the thief who rejected Him.

The passage today about the repentant thief assures us that it is never too late to turn to Christ. ... I love the epitaph on the grave of a horse-thief who fell from a horse that he was trying to steal. He died from his injuries but this was written on his grave marker:

*Between the stirrup and the ground,
I mercy ask’d, I mercy found.
It is never too late—never!*

My wife’s father died a painful death of pancreatic cancer. But at the 11th hour he wonderfully repented and turned to Christ in faith. On his deathbed he made a profession of faith... but prior to that... Patti and I... and Patti’s

brother (Tom) who led him to the Lord... often thought of him as the world's worst sinner. ... But do you know what...? Our passage today seems to be saying: "What if you are...? Who cares! It doesn't matter..." If this penitent thief could be saved (just like that!) – NOT by going to church... not by first cleaning up his life... not by going through baptism or any other ritual... nothing – JUST JESUS – then there is hope for anyone! Jesus has TREMENDOUS love.

Our hearts are elevated as we reflect on the grace of God that had come to my wife's father. We can't wait to see him again.

Luke's account of the cross is not about a good thief but about a sinful (wretched) thief - and a good Savior. ... It is about the fact that Jesus loves you and I... and He loves to forgive our sins.