

Final Words, Two **Today you will be with me in Paradise**

Luke 23:38-43, 19:10; Isaiah 53:12

1. The fame of the criminals.

2. The faith of the criminals.

- *Luke 23:42*

3. The fate of the criminals.

- **The cross of rebellion**

- *Luke 23:39*

- **The cross of rebellion resulted in hell**

- *Luke 12:4-5; 2 Peter 2:4*

- **The cross of repentance**

- *Luke 23:40-41; Romans 6:23*

- **The cross of repentance resulted in hope**

- **The cross of redemption**

- *John 8:46; 2 Corinthians 5:19, 21; John 10:17-18;
Luke 23:42; John 1:12*

- **The cross of redemption resulted in Heaven**

- *Luke 23:43; John 14:3*

love.learn.live.
westvalleychurch.com



West Valley Church
March 8, 2026
Michael O'Neill

Final Words: When Love Spoke From the Cross¹ “Today you will be with me in paradise”

Last words are always important, and that's especially true for Jesus. *Every* word that Jesus spoke was on purpose and packed with meaning, so you can bet that his last words should matter to us. They are rich with truth that reveal his heart of love, his purpose, his power, and our hope. That's why we are in this series called “Last Words: When Love Spoke From the Cross.” So today let's look at that second statement from the Gospel accounts (would you please stand):

They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, “So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!” In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. “He saved others,” they said, “but he can't save himself! Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.” Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him. (Mark 15:27-32, niv)

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.” “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:38-43, niv)

(Thank you for standing; please be seated). Let me put this into the context of what has happened according to the Bible accounts. Jesus was arrested the night before and faced a trial sometime after midnight. He was led away with His hands bound – the same hands that had healed the sick. Jesus was blindfolded and beaten and mocked by the soldiers. He then faced a second trial with more illegal proceedings. Jesus is now exhausted physically by lack of sleep, the physical beatings, loss of fluids, and emotionally exhausted by the

¹ Sources:

Fleming Rutledge, *The Seven Last Words from the Cross* Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2005

Adam Hamilton, *Final Words from the Cross* Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2011

Ken Heer, [Luke: A Commentary for Bible Students](#) (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007)

David Neale, *New Beacon Bible Commentary, Luke 9-24: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, 2013 William Barclay, [The Gospel of Luke](#), *The New Daily Study Bible* (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001)

ridicule and rejection.

The ruler Pilate has Jesus scourged in an attempt to appease the people who are crying out for his crucifixion. This was not something that was ordinarily done as part of the crucifixion; it was almost always one or the other. When it came to scourging, Roman law allowed the prisoner to be beaten to the point just before death. They knew exactly when that point was reached by measuring if there was a rapidly increasing pulse and an irregular respiratory rate. The whip was a handle with three or more straps, at the end of each were small dumbbell shaped lead balls, bone, glass or small pieces of sharp metal attached which would grab and gouge out pieces of tissue and bone. Jesus' skin was stripped in long, ribbon-like segments, causing profound arterial bleeding.

A crown of six-inch long thorns was then pressed deeply into His scalp. This would cause additional blood loss. A purple robe was thrown across Jesus' shoulders and back. This may have served as a temporary compressive dressing, helping to congeal the blood pouring from his gaping wounds. The mockery continues by the soldiers as they spit on Him and beat Him with reeds and sarcastically call Him "King of the Jews."

Pilate then presents Jesus to the crowd wearing his thorns and robe, and says, "Here is the man" – as if to say, "Are you happy now?"

Medically, Jesus would demonstrate cold, pale sweaty skin, becoming bluish and cyanotic. His countenance would be haggard and drawn. His reflexes would be depressed, His respiration shallow and barely perceptible.

But the people are still not satisfied, so Pilate gives in to the manipulation of the Jewish leaders, and Jesus is condemned to death by crucifixion. The purple robe is stripped away. This would be similar to the careless ripping off of a surgical dressing, causing the wounds to bleed freely once again.

Jesus is given the crossbeam to bear to the Place of the Skull – Golgotha. Thankfully, someone is enlisted to help carry this piece of splintered timber that could weigh up to 100 pounds. Luke 23:33 gives a very brief statement about the crucifixion. We actually know more about the specifics of crucifixion from Roman records that give the gory details. Then, Luke says, "When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified Him, along with the criminals - one on His right, the other on the left." They placed Jesus on the middle cross to signify that of the three, He was the most worthy of death.

Jesus has been crucified; nailed to the cross in between two condemned criminals, both of them cursing Jesus, but one was taking it even further, using blasphemous terms. Then...the other had a change of heart.

Jesus was intentionally hung between the two criminals as a very public way to humiliate him and his followers. They wanted to stage a theatrical event in order to maximize the humiliation of Jesus in front of the crowds by placing Him between two criminals.

Actually, it was fitting for Jesus, because this is the way he led His life. Jesus said this about himself:

"For the Son of man came to seek and save the lost." (Luke 19:10, niv)

What an amazing picture of grace – even in His death, He was surrounded by lost people.

Of course, this also fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah from over 700 years earlier:

“...he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors.”
(Isaiah 53:12, niv)

We talked about that last week, too.

There were three crosses on that hill. The wooden crosses were the same and the methods were the same, and yet what they represented, and the three men on them were very different from each other. So were the results.

So with that in mind, when we dig deeper into this statement that Jesus made, and the circumstances behind it, we learn some truth for our own lives.

So let's start by looking at...

1. The fame of the criminals.

Crucifixion was reserved for the worst of criminals; those who were murderers, insurrectionists, and traitors. The original language indicates that they were crucified for high treason. The two criminals were not petty thieves. Whatever it was they did, it was worthy of death. One of the criminals even admitted that.

Of course, we know that Jesus didn't deserve to be there. But Jesus was crucified in the middle. Every effort was made to humiliate Jesus to the worst extent possible.

While Jesus was known far and wide for his teaching and miracles, the other two would have been known far and wide for their crimes against humanity.

Next see...

2. The faith of the criminals.

We've already seen the faith of Jesus demonstrated by the fact that he was praying for the very ones who were doing this to him. But the other two are an interesting study in contrast.

First of all, where we read the words that said they “hurled insults at him,” it means literally “blasphemed.” Whatever it was they were saying, it was the worst of all possible insults against God Himself.

One of these men has absolutely no faith in Jesus at all. He continually mocks Jesus; not just joining in with the crowd, but actually taking his insults further than all the others.

The second man starts out with all the rest, mocking Jesus. But he begins to realize who Jesus is. He saw how Jesus treated those who were crucifying Him. He heard Jesus praying for the ones who did this to him; asking the father to forgive them and thought, “Maybe Jesus is praying for me, too.” He had heard Jesus being referred to as the Christ, had seen the sign hung above his head that read “King of the Jews.” You've got to remember, too, that word travelled fast in those days – especially word of the things Jesus was doing like healing the sick, casting out demons and raising the dead (there was no internet or email;

word of mouth was the way news was spread). So the second criminal probably began to remember the stories of all the great miracles that Jesus had performed. And, maybe for the first time in years, he has a conscience. He rebukes the other criminal. He turns on his friend and says: "Don't you have any conscience at all? Don't you even fear God? Do you realize who this man is? You and I deserve to be here—we're getting exactly what we deserve. But not this man; he doesn't deserve to be here at all." And then notice what the criminal says to Jesus:

he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." (Luke 23:42, niv)

There's a key word there that shows this criminal's sudden step of faith. Notice he didn't say to Jesus, "remember me IF you come into your kingdom." He said "WHEN."

Now listen: it was obvious already that Jesus was *not* going to survive. It was obvious he was not going to be any kind of earthly king; Jesus would soon be dead. That means this criminal realized that Jesus' kingdom was a *different* kind of kingdom. And he knew it enough to ask Jesus to remember him. It wasn't a request for an autograph, you know like we do with people. It wasn't like when we say things like, "Will you remember me when you become rich and famous?" That's not what this man was doing. He was saying, "Jesus, when you take your rightful place in authority on your throne in heaven over all creation, will you remember me? I know death isn't the end for us; I want to be with you after I die." This was a bold statement of brand-new faith.

Some say that these two men represent the kinds of responses *we* have to hard situations. In that painful situation, one man is bitter and angry at God, the other turns to God in faith and in prayer. Which do you do when you face a difficult time?

As a result of their faith, or lack of it, now look at...

3. The fate of the criminals.

Three men all died the same way; all three finding their lives ended nailed to a cross. And yet they were three very different crosses and three very different fates. First there was...

- **The cross of rebellion.**

On the cross of rebellion was a shameless and hardened man. Look at verse 39:

"One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at Him: 'Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!'" (Luke 23:39, niv)

I already told you that the word "insult" is translated as "defamation or blasphemy." He was doing much more than just making fun of Jesus. He was bitter and sarcastic, rejecting anything good even on the day of his own death – cursing his way to hell in the most solemn hour of all history. He rejected Jesus.

His was a cross of rebellion. He threw away his chance at forgiveness. Because of his hard heart, He missed out on heaven. Even in the valley of the shadow of death, he was too proud to surrender His life to Christ. So...

- the cross of rebellion **resulted in hell.**

The fate of this man for rejecting Jesus, for rebelling against him, was a place the Bible calls hell. We have no indication that this man had any kind of change of heart; he certainly didn't fear God. Jesus had said this earlier in his ministry:

“Dear friends, don't be afraid of those who want to kill your body; they cannot do any more to you after that. But I'll tell you whom to fear. Fear God, who has the power to kill you and then throw you into hell. Yes, he's the one to fear.” (Luke 12:4-5, nlt)

The Bible says that:

“God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgment.” (2 Peter 2:4, niv)

Don't be mistaken friends; hell is real.

God is very clear that when we reject Him, we are headed to an eternity in eternal punishment (*Matthew 25:41, 46; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Revelation 20:10*). As long as we are alive, we always have at least that moment to accept Christ (*Hebrews 3:15, 7:25; 2 Corinthians 6:2; Romans 10:13; Revelation 3:20*). But once our lives are over, apart from Christ we are headed to an eternity in hell. *That was the first criminal's fate.*

Now look at...

- **The cross of repentance.**

The second criminal hung on the cross of repentance. I'll explain what the word “repentance” means in a moment. But both he and his buddy were being punished for their crimes, and yet he was different because he recognized that Jesus didn't deserve to die. Both of these guys were insulting Jesus when the day began.

But then something happened to the second criminal. He opened his eyes, his ears, and his heart. As he watched and listened to Jesus, his heart was convicted of his own wickedness. He recognized his need before it was too late.

Instead of curses from the lips of Jesus as the soldiers hammered in the nails, Jesus prayed a prayer of forgiveness for his torturers: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing.” Maybe that expression of grace is what softened the criminal's hard heart.

Look again at verses 40-41:

“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.’” (Luke 23:40-41, niv)

Can you imagine the courage that this took to defy the influence of his friend and the mocking crowd?

This man demonstrated saving faith because he respected Christ. We need to revere Jesus as the holy and all-powerful God. This guy was beginning to honor God while his cohort in

crime continued to spout blasphemy.

He admitted his guilt. His deeds were evil and he knew that he deserved to be punished. He came to realize what the Bible tells us:

“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 6:23, niv)

So this man did what the Bible calls “repentance.” That’s why this was a cross of repentance. To repent means to literally do a 180-degree turn. To turn around. That’s what this man did. He couldn’t even move—he was nailed to the cross—but he turned around 180 degrees, turning his back on sin and turning to Jesus. Rather than face hell, his faith...

- **...resulted in hope.**

Hope that Jesus could change things for him. Hope that his sinful life, and now his death, would not be the final answer for him. Hope that, because of Jesus, life held much, much more for him even after death.

He could hope for this as he looked to...

- **The cross of redemption.**

Redemption means to be saved from sin and changed by God. Here we tread on holy ground. “This man has done nothing wrong.” These words of the repenting criminal are a remarkable testimony to the character of Jesus Christ. Skeptics have scrutinized Jesus’ life and yet no flaw has ever been found. In John 8:46 Jesus asked a question that no one has ever been able to answer:

“Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?” (John 8:46, niv)

At Jesus’ trial, *no* grounds had been established on which He could justly be condemned. So why then did Jesus die? Was it all a ghastly miscarriage of justice? From the human point of view there’s no greater blot on human history than the story of Jesus’ crucifixion. It is history’s darkest atrocity, but to be understood, it has to be seen as the climax of God’s glorious plan of redemption for us. What Satan and we humans meant for ultimate evil, God meant for ultimate good for us. (*Genesis 50:20*) That’s how Paul saw it when he wrote:

“God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation... God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:19, 21, niv)

The middle cross was the cross of redemption. The death of Christ was quite different from that of the other two victims. They died without any choice in the matter; their lives were taken away from them. But it was quite different with Jesus: he *willingly gave* his life; no one took it from him. That’s exactly what Jesus told his disciples just a couple of months earlier:

“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.” (John 10:17-18, niv)

The death of Jesus was inevitable *only* because he willed it so. His death was a voluntary sacrifice, “the righteous for the unrighteous” as 1 Peter 3:18 says. The basis for our redemption is the shedding of His blood and him willingly suffering and giving his life for us. Evil did its worst on the cross. Wicked hands tortured and crucified the Lord of life, but where man’s rebellion against God reached its limit, the grace of God shone brightly in all its glorious splendor. Remember this from today’s Scripture: The last act of the Son of God before he died was to save a sinner!

The second criminal realized this, so he confessed Christ. He knew that Jesus was sinless and righteous. This man was beginning to see that Jesus had done nothing wrong at all and that Jesus could ultimately save him from the ravages of eternal punishment, so he asked for salvation. As he thought about the fundamental issues of life and death, of right and wrong, belief rose in his soul and he blurted out a key element of faith in verse 42:

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” (Luke 23:42)

This is a very important part of saving faith. The man did more than just respect God, recognize own his guilt, and see Jesus as sinless. He also reached out in faith by asking Jesus to remember him. He was doing what the Bible says to do:

“Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God.” (John 1:12, niv)

That criminal had more faith than the rest of Jesus’ followers put together; remember that all of them except for John had betrayed and abandoned Jesus.

This cross of redemption...

- **...resulted in Heaven.**

Jesus’ answer to the criminal’s prayer was immediate in verse 43:

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43)

Notice that the criminal was given much more than he asked for. Instead of just “remembering” him, Jesus said, “You will be with me.” And, instead of this taking place sometime in the future, Jesus said, “Today, as soon as you take your last breath, you will be with me in paradise.” Jesus saved a man even while He was on the cross! “Today, you will be with me in paradise.”

The word “paradise” is a Persian word that referred to a beautiful walled garden used by a king. When a Persian monarch wanted to honor one of his subjects, he would invite him to take a walk with him in the garden. Jesus was promising the repentant rebel not only immortality, but also an honored place as a companion in God’s garden. I’m reminded of what Jesus said in his teachings

“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me

that you also may be where I am.” (John 14:3, niv)

So what does this tell us?

Salvation is simple (at least for us; that’s because of all that Jesus suffered). The devil has blinded the eyes of people into thinking that to be saved involves all kinds of religious hoops you have to jump through. But this clearly isn’t true. The man on the cross was saved simply by asking the Lord to save him. Obviously in the words of his request there is an attitude of repentance as he threw himself on the mercy of Jesus. That’s all that is necessary to salvation – repentance and faith. He didn’t have time to join a church or be baptized. He simply trusted Jesus.

This means the very worst person can be saved. There can be no doubt that this guy was a lawbreaker. He had broken the laws of the land, and he was being crucified for that reason, but the extent of his sin didn’t alter his chance of being saved one bit. Friends, no one is too sinful to be saved. It’s like that old hymn that says, “the vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.”

It’s never too late to come to Christ. While it’s dangerous to wait until you’re on your deathbed, a person can turn to Christ in faith right before they take their last breath, and be with Jesus for all eternity. Having said that, don’t wait too long to accept Christ. Deathbed confessions miss out on being able to enjoy abundant life *here*. The criminal on the cross had one final chance, and he took it. Your final chance might be right now! The question becomes, what cross most describes you today? Everyone in the world is on one of these two crosses today. We’re *all* guilty and deserve to die. We’re all criminals who have committed cosmic crimes against a Holy God. Only those who repent will be redeemed. Those who rebel end in hell. They are lost forever!

Which cross are you on this morning? The cross of rebellion or the cross of repentance? The cross of repentance helps us see that no one need despair, and the cross of rebellion teaches us that no one should put off a decision to follow Christ.

Because of the cross of redemption, you have to choose between rebellion or repentance. To *not* choose is to choose rebellion.

Look at the cross of redemption. Go to the cross. See Jesus there, crucified. Look back through the annals of history to see Jesus’ face, and you will see him looking intently at you. He had you on his mind when he died for you.

The cross of repentance speaks of hope and assurance, but it was only made possible by the third cross, the cross of redemption that gives us heaven.

I want to conclude by doing something unusual. I want you to watch a two-minute excerpt of another person’s sermon. That’s right; I’m concluding my sermon by having you watch someone else’s. But here’s why: I can’t say it any better than he did. His name is Alistair Begg. He’s now retired, but he’s an American pastor who was born in Scotland. He pastored Parkside Church in Cleveland Ohio for 41 years. Please watch this.

Lead in prayer

Benediction:

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Hebrews 13:20-21, niv)