

**Luke 23:39-43 (1984 NIV)**  
***Saved on the Cross***

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

40 But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence?”

41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

42 Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

43 Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

**Introduction**

The year 1899 marked the deaths of two well-known men—D. L. Moody, the acclaimed evangelist, and Robert Ingersoll, the famous lawyer, orator, and political leader.

The two men had many similarities. Both were raised in Christian homes. Both were skilled orators. Both travelled extensively and were widely respected. Both drew immense crowds when they spoke and attracted loyal followings. But there was one striking difference between them—their view of God.

Ingersoll was an agnostic and a follower of naturalism. He had no belief in the eternal, but stressed the importance of living only in the here and now. Ingersoll made light of the Bible. To him the Bible was “a fable, an obscenity, a humbug, a sham and a lie”. He was a bold spokesman against the Christian faith.

Ingersoll’s contemporary, D. L. Moody, had different convictions. He dedicated his life to presenting a resurrected King to a dying people. He embraced the Bible as the hope for humanity and the Cross as the turning point of history. He left behind a legacy of written and spoken words, institutions of education, churches, and changed lives.

Two men who were both powerful speakers and influential leaders. One rejected God; the other embraced Him. The impact of their decisions is seen most clearly in the way they died.

Ingersoll died suddenly. The news of his death stunned his family. His body was kept at home for several days because his wife was reluctant

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to part with it. It was eventually removed for the sake of the family's health.

Ingersoll's remains were cremated, and the public response to his passing was altogether dismal. For a man who put all his hopes on this world, death was tragic and came without the consolation of hope.

Moody's legacy was different. On 22 December 1899, Moody awoke to his last winter dawn. Having grown increasingly weak during the night, he began to speak in slow measured words—"Earth recedes, heaven opens before me!" His son hurried across the room to his father's side. "Father, you are dreaming," he said. "No. This is no dream," Moody said. "It is beautiful. It is like a trance. If this is death, it is sweet. God is calling me, and I must go. Don't call me back."

The funeral service of D. L. Moody reflected that same confidence. There was no despair. Loved ones gathered to sing praises to God at a triumphant home-going service.

As we prepare for the Easter season; as we think about the Lord's suffering and death on the Cross, let's be reminded that how well we have lived is often summarized by one single, concluding event—i.e. how well we have died on earth when time runs out on us.

([http://www.sermonillustrator.org/illustrator/sermon6/dwight\\_l\\_moody.htm](http://www.sermonillustrator.org/illustrator/sermon6/dwight_l_moody.htm))

Our text today depicts for us three ways to die. One death reveals the corrupt nature of man. The second reveals a contrite spirit while there's still a little time. And the third reveals the compassionate grace of God for lost humanity.

The corrupt nature of man is seen in the 1<sup>st</sup> thief. He showed us one way to die is to ...

### **I. Die in sin (v. 39).**

The 1<sup>st</sup> thief joined others around the Cross in mocking Jesus. In v. 35, the crowd sneered at Jesus and said: "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One." In v. 36, the Roman soldiers added: "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." In response to such mockery, the 1<sup>st</sup> thief joined in and said to Jesus: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

The NIV says he “hurled insults” at Jesus. Literally, he abused Jesus verbally in such a way as to commit blasphemy against God. He not merely showed contempt at Jesus. He showed irreverence to God with what he said and with the attitude he said it. The implication is that this thief did not believe one bit that Jesus was the Messiah. He did not believe one bit that Jesus was able to save Himself and His other fellow sufferers. So, in his bitter sarcasm, this 1<sup>st</sup> thief implied that Jesus was a liar; that He was claiming to be what He was not.

In other words, he was so blind to his own sin, yet so vocal about what he perceived to be the sin of Jesus. Such is the corrupt nature of fallen humanity we see in him.

This thief failed to see that he was to die in his sin. Crucifixion was seen in those days as the most horrible type of execution. For that reason, the Greeks and Romans used it only for slaves and foreigners, not for their own citizens.

Death by crucifixion was reserved for serious crimes. But this 1<sup>st</sup> thief failed to see the seriousness of his own crime. He failed to see that he was suffering as due punishment for his crime. However, what was so clear to him was his own perception of Jesus’ unworthiness—that great liar who claimed to be what He was not.

In short, this thief was dying in his sin because he had no spirit of brokenness, or guilt, or repentance. He had no interest in getting right with God. But if one-in-a-million chance Jesus was really from God, then this thief’s only interest in Jesus was to use Jesus to get him out of this mess—“If you are really the Christ, save yourself, and save us. Get me out of this mess.” Jesus, at best, was someone whom he could manipulate to help him escape the cross, not to get right with God. It had never entered his mind one moment that he should repent or change from his life of sin.

Many people today are like this 1<sup>st</sup> thief. They may not abuse Jesus verbally like this thief did. But they are like this thief in that they are so blind to their own unrighteousness, yet so critical of what they perceive as the flaws of others. They do not see their need to repent and change. They believe they are okay or always right in life.

Psychologists say that those who believe that they are always okay or right will find it hard to enjoy deep and real relationships with others. They will always insist that there is nothing wrong with them, and if there is indeed anything wrong, it must be others’ fault. Such people are in a state of denial because they are often very defensive and they put up a great pretence.

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Jesus' body was broken on the Cross so that we can see our need of Him in our own brokenness. As we prepare for the Easter season, it will be wise to ask the Lord to help us experience brokenness. I don't mean we be cruel and break ourselves up into many pieces. I am talking about being anguished by our own sin and weeping over it. When we are anguished, we begin to seek the Lord with a broken heart. We don't point a finger at Him like the 1<sup>st</sup> thief, saying: "If you are so great, get me out of this mess." Rather, anguished by our own sin, we come to the Lord with a broken heart and say: "Lord, I've sinned against you. But out of this mess, teach me to live and do right in your sight."

The unfortunate thing is that we are often not anguished by our own sin, but angered by what we perceive as sin in others. So, there's often no grieving over personal unrighteousness, but only grumbling about others in our self-righteousness. Indeed, if we are to experience brokenness, we need more anguish than anger. Many of the ills in the world today have to do with people reacting to one another in anger. There will be more peace, more love, more kindness, and more restraints if people are more anguished by their own ugliness. Often times we think that we are angry at sin. But if we take time to examine ourselves seriously, being angry in sin is really what we are.

The nails on Jesus' body were there because of people who were angry with Him—they charged Him for wrongdoing. They were angry with what they presumed was His sin rather than anguished by their own sins. Imagine the nails being taken out of Jesus' body, what do you see? The scars inflicted by those piercing nails. This is what anger can do. It not only makes us blind to our own sin, but also leaves some permanent scars on others as a matter of consequence. Indeed, we need more anguish than anger in our world today.

The nephew of a church friend had a serious accident recently. He was rushed to the A & E Dept. with one collapsed lung and a serious head injury. The doctors had to remove a small part of his brain because it was so badly crushed. In fact, one of the doctors had told the young man's loved ones to be prepared for the worst as the pressure in his brain kept building up. Even after two surgeries on the brain, the doctors could only dare to predict a 40% recovery of his mental faculty.

The days that followed were extremely agonizing for the parents of this young man, especially his father who's not a believer. Both father and son had not been enjoying a good relationship with each other all along. The father himself was a strong-headed person. However, he was greatly traumatized by what had happened to his son.

Sensing the moving of God's Spirit in this father, my church friend and her husband, together with other Christians, supported him and his family at this time with prayers, love, and comfort. A series of wonderful events began to happen.

First, the young man regained his consciousness. Later, against the fear of the doctors, he was able to talk. Not only that, he was able to recognize people and recollect past events. And he said to his father whom he always had difficulty getting along: "Dad, I think God is giving us another chance to be father and son again." He also told his parents not to blame his friend who was driving the car when the accident happened. This driver was already an emotional wreck because he was so guilt stricken.

At a prayer meeting specially organized by my friend and her husband, someone shared the Gospel with this strong-headed father. By this time, this man's heart was broken by the Spirit of God and the love of His people. He was not an angry man (as he used to be) shouting, "God, if you are so real, get me out of this mess." Rather, as a broken man anguished by his own ugliness, he prayed the sinner's prayer.

Jesus' body was broken on the Cross so that we can see our need of Him in our own brokenness.

As we prepare for the Easter season, it will be wise to ask the Lord to help us experience brokenness. Let's not be like the 1<sup>st</sup> thief. He looked at Jesus and said with anger and sarcasm: "If you are the Christ, save yourself and save us. If you are really what you claim to be, get me out of this mess." Rather, let's prepare our hearts for the Easter season by examining our lives, see if there's any way in us displeasing to God and in anguish say: "Lord, out of my circumstances in life, teach him to live and do right in your sight." Would you pray that to Him this day?

The 1<sup>st</sup> thief's attitude reveals the corrupt nature of man that leads him to die in sin. That's not how we are to live and die. The second death reveals a contrite spirit while there's still a little time. And this contrite spirit is seen in the 2<sup>nd</sup> thief. He showed us what it means to ...

## **II. Die to sin (vv. 40-42).**

In his rebuke of the 1<sup>st</sup> thief in v. 40, he demonstrated his fear of God. He viewed the blasphemy of the 1<sup>st</sup> thief as worthy of divine judgment.

Moreover, he admitted his own guilt. He did not try to give excuses for his criminal acts. He recognized that he was justly punished, and getting what

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he deserved in v. 41. In fact, he went even further—he defended the innocence of Christ in v. 42—“This man has done nothing wrong.”

This 2<sup>nd</sup> thief took his suffering without any haughty grumbling. He knew he had no basis for any claim to being righteous.

- While the 1<sup>st</sup> thief thought that the crucified Christ was no better than himself (i.e. Christ was just as bad a criminal as himself), the 2<sup>nd</sup> thief acknowledged the goodness of Christ—“This man has done nothing wrong.”
- While the 1<sup>st</sup> thief implied that Jesus had lied in His claim to be the Messiah, this 2<sup>nd</sup> thief acknowledged that Jesus had spoken the truth about Himself.
- While the 1<sup>st</sup> thief was angry at Jesus, this 2<sup>nd</sup> thief was anguished by his own sinfulness. He saw his total brokenness—nothing in him could be used as an excuse to escape the cross.

Many people may confess with their mouths that they are sinners before God. Yet, when suffering comes their way, they consider it their right to be angry at God. But this 2<sup>nd</sup> thief teaches us how to respond to suffering as a pilgrim here on earth.

Many times we do wrong yet do not suffer for it—we hardly complain about that. But when we suffer, even for our own misdoing, we expect God to bail us out. And we complain if He is slow in doing that in our estimation.

But the 2<sup>nd</sup> thief shows us that in our suffering, we are to look to the Lord ... until He has mercy on us. Such an attitude does not remove our suffering, but it can temper it.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> thief looked to the Lord and said in v. 42: “Jesus, remember me ...” This 2<sup>nd</sup> thief was not seeking to escape from the cross. He feared God. He accepted justice for his wrong doings. He acknowledged the goodness and power of Christ. So, he turned to Christ and pleaded help—not to escape death on the cross, but to ask Christ to remember him. This is a call for mercy. The 2<sup>nd</sup> thief knew that he had nothing deserving of Jesus’ mercy. He had to look to Jesus and plea for mercy.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> thief said: “Jesus, remember me when (not if) you come into your kingdom.” This is a statement of belief in Jesus—that He was indeed the Messiah whom He claimed to be; that He would become King and bring in the eternal Kingdom. As far as the 2<sup>nd</sup> thief was concerned, it was not if Jesus would become King, but when He would. Unlike the 1<sup>st</sup> thief, the 2<sup>nd</sup>

was not seeking to escape from the cross, but seeking to enter the divine Kingdom. He knew there was nothing in him deserving of this. But with faith in the mercy of God, he looked to Jesus and pleaded: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

It was reported that an 11-storey building in central Turkey collapsed. A man managed to escape from the building shortly before it collapsed. Unfortunately, his wife and two sons were trapped inside the rubble. Attempts to locate and rescue them proved futile.

The broken-hearted man then began to prepare graves for his wife and sons whom he presumed had already been killed. If he could not find their bodies, he wanted at least to have graves as standing memorials of them.

But almost six days later, rescue workers found his 16-year-old son, Kalem, trapped in the rubble. They pulled the boy out, much to the delight of all. Kalem had survived because he was trapped in an air pocket between concrete blocks. He also tried to conserve his energy by sleeping most of the time.

Kalem said: “I cried out non-stop. I heard rescuers’ voices from afar and they gradually came closer. I tried not to lose hope, thinking they would eventually find me.”

He is an example of what it means to believe in hope, to cry out in hope ... until hope is realized.

(*The Straits Times*, 9 February 2004)

Similarly, the 2<sup>nd</sup> thief believed in Jesus, cried out to Jesus to remember him ... and Jesus answered his belief with a promise of His loving mercy. The 2<sup>nd</sup> thief died to his sin because of his belief in Jesus Christ. He was saved into the Kingdom of God. In the same way, we are saved when we believe in Jesus Christ—at that point we die to our sin. But unlike the 2<sup>nd</sup> thief who had no time to live his earthly life afresh for Jesus, you and I face the challenge to live well for the Lord each day. In that sense, we not only die to sin at our point of belief. We are also to die to sin daily as we seek to live holy lives for the Lord each day. However, we are often weak. Hence, we cry to Him daily for His loving mercy to empower us to live well for Him, and to forgive us when we have failed.

As we prepare for the coming Easter, it is wise to ask the Lord to remember us in His loving mercy. Perhaps for too long you have been trying to justify

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yourself. But the Lord wants you to ask Him deal with you in His loving mercy because you have nothing credible to justify yourself. Or for too long you have been trying to struggle in your own strength. But the Lord wants you to look to Him and ask Him to lift you up from your struggle in His loving mercy. So, Easter is not a time to boast of our own worthiness or ability. But in our brokenness, we surrender our unworthiness and inability to the Lord's tender mercy and say: "Lord, I will stop justifying myself. I will stop struggling on my own. Please remember me in your tender mercy." Would you say that to the Lord today?

The 2<sup>nd</sup> thief's attitude reveals a contrite spirit while there's still a little time. It depicts how we are to die to sin and to live for God. The third death depicts the compassionate grace of Jesus Christ Himself. He shows us the way He is to die as God has intended for Him—i.e. to ...

### **III. Die for sin (v. 43).**

The 2<sup>nd</sup> thief received from Jesus more than what he had expected. Jesus told him in v. 43: "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." Jesus emphasized that He was telling the truth. The 1<sup>st</sup> thief did not believe one bit that Jesus was what He claimed to be. The 2<sup>nd</sup> thief believed enough to call on Jesus to remember him. And in response to his faith, Jesus added a great promise. It was such a great promise that it seemed too good to be true. Hence, it would take a substantial measure of faith to receive it as truth. Jesus counted the 2<sup>nd</sup> thief as having enough faith to accept a great truth. Indeed, faith in Jesus leads us to greater truths from the Lord Himself.

And the great truth from Jesus to the 2<sup>nd</sup> thief is a great promise. Jesus said to him: "Today you will be with me in paradise." What rich blessings in this great promise!

- First, "today" implies something immediate. The 2<sup>nd</sup> thief had expected that he would somehow have to wait for the Kingdom to be with Jesus. But Jesus replied him that no waiting was necessary—"today" would be the time for it to happen. Also, "today" implies that this 2<sup>nd</sup> thief would be with Jesus in paradise simply because of his faith, not works. After all, he was soon to die and there would be no time for him to redeem himself with any good works. Indeed, there would be nothing more he could have done in view of what Jesus was going to complete on the Cross.
- Second, "will be" in Jesus' great promise implies something very certain and definite. It is not something that may or can come about.



It is something that “will be”. Such is the strong assurance in Jesus’ words.

- Third, “with me” in Jesus’ great promise speaks of being in His presence. Indeed, paradise is really no paradise if Jesus is not there. Paradise is only a better place because Jesus is there. To be in paradise is to live in joy not because it is the greatest entertainment centre or the most comfortable place of all, but because Jesus is there to be with those who believe in Him.

## Conclusion

How well we have lived is often summarized by one single, concluding event—i.e. how well we have died on earth when time runs out on us. Our text today depicts for us three ways to die.

- One death reveals the corrupt nature of man that leads him to die in sin and be lost forever without God. That’s not how God wants us to die.
- The second death reveals a contrite spirit while there’s still a little time. It depicts how we are to die to sin—repent of our sin and live for God with whatever time we have. This is in line with God’s will for us—i.e. to die to sin by believing in and living for Jesus.
- The third death depicts the compassionate grace of Jesus Christ Himself. He shows us the way He is to die as God has intended for Him—i.e. to die for the sin of the world. Only Jesus could die for sin because He was the only perfect and sinless one while on earth.

Even near His death, Jesus was always thinking of forgiving sinners (v. 34), and saving a lost soul in the person of the 2<sup>nd</sup> thief (v. 43). He never gives up on sinners. He seizes every opportunity there is. What does this imply today? Well, it means it is never too late.

- If you are not yet a believer in Jesus Christ, it is never too late to believe in Him, or to learn more about Him. The 2<sup>nd</sup> thief was only a short sentence away from paradise when he looked at Jesus and said: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” If you want to believe in Jesus, or to learn more about Him, I invite you to talk with me or any of the Christians here after the service. We will only be too happy to talk with you.
- If you are a Christian, it is never too late for you to reach out to a lost person. As you prepare for another Easter, would you commit one unbeliever you know to the Lord in prayer, and ask God to help you touch that person with His love? Remember, in all His agony on the

Cross, the Lord brought one more lost person into His Kingdom. In all our comfort today, how then should we respond to lost people around us?

Let me give you some time to commune with God silently in your heart. Then I'll close in prayer.