

A Word of Salvation

Words In Red: Seven Last Sayings from the Cross

Luke 23:32-43

Pastor Jarrett Stephens

This week, I got one of those phone calls that you never like receiving. It started with a text that said, “Jarrett, will you call me? It’s about Mary.” The text was from the niece of a woman that has been like a grandmother to me and probably even more important than that, a prayer warrior for me for over 20 years.

I picked up the phone, called and heard what I knew I was going to hear, but didn’t want to hear and that is that Mary “Grandma” Anderwald had succumbed to a long, difficult bout with pneumonia and at the age of 85 passed from this life onto the next.

Debbie and I had just talked to her about a month or so ago just to catch up and let her know that we were thinking about her and praying for her. She woke up at 4:00 every morning to spend time with Jesus and I was one of many that were on her routine prayer list.

Only in eternity will I be able to see what God did...what came about in my life as a result of her prayers. Obviously, I’ve been thinking a lot about Mary this week and her influence in my life, and because of her death, it’s caused me to think more about my own mortality.

Death does that doesn’t it? Especially the death of a loved one or close friend. You go to a funeral and I believe this is why funerals are in many ways good for the soul – our attendance doesn’t just honor the person that has preceded us in death, but it forces us to think about our own death, which should in turn make us live our life for what really matters.

You’ve heard the statistic and I want to highlight it here at the outset of this message: 1/1 persons will die. It’s a reality.

Psalm 90:10,12 – “The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away...So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.”

Today’s message is one that compels us to do just that – to number our days. To consider that our physical lives here on earth are just a vapor...a mist. As James writes in his letter in the New Testament, “we are here today and gone tomorrow.”

And while no one likes talking about death...it’s like we think if we can avoid talking about it...avoid thinking about it...then death MIGHT somehow avoid us! But we know deep down that’s not possible.

I don’t enjoy preaching about the reality of death, but it comes with the job description! This is my role as your pastor. To encourage...to shepherd...to guide...and to warn. And today’s text forces us to wrestle with this subject.

And so, let's dig in. The title of the message today is: **A Word of Salvation**

We are looking in this series leading up to Easter at the last seven sayings of Jesus on the cross. Scripture records seven statements...in some Bibles they are "words in red" because the red designates the words spoken by Jesus.

We know they are also in red because on the cross, his red blood is being poured out for the sins of the world. Let's look at our text:

Luke 23:32-43 – "Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³ And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ And Jesus said, (Statement number one here...we looked at it last week: a word of forgiveness) "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine ³⁷ and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." ³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹ And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ And he said to him, (Second statement from the cross – Words in Red – a word of salvation) "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

From the beginning of time, man has innately known and believed deep within there is something more after death. This makes sense because when God creates us, he hard-wired us to believe this.

Eccl. 3:11b – "...Also, he has put eternity into man's heart..."

World religions don't deny the belief in an afterlife the debate surrounds what that afterlife is like. Our text today teaches the Christian worldview on what happens once we die, and in this message today we will learn three major truths about what life after death is like. We'll learn:

- WHO can have this life after death...
- HOW we can attain and be assured of life after death...
- WHAT life after death is going to be like...

The Bible uses the word "saved" to denote someone who is assured of life after death because of their faith in Jesus. When we trust in Christ and his work on the cross and in the resurrection, our sins are forgiven, and we are made right with God.

At the very moment of trusting in Christ, we experience salvation. We are saved. Let me give you some scriptural examples of this terminology being used:

Acts 4:12 – “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

Acts 16:30-31 – (Paul and Silas worshipping in prison) “Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

Rom. 10:9-10,13 – “because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved...¹³ For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Eph. 2:8 – “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...”

From the Christian worldview, anyone who wants to experience life after death must be saved. And so, the question I want you to reflect on in this moment as it relates to having life after death is, “Are you saved?”

Now, there are some here today and you’re new to church you may be thinking, “Saved? I didn’t even know I was lost!” This concept of biblical salvation is foreign to you. And that’s okay. If that’s the case, you are in the right place, and hopefully by the end of our time together today you will have a little clearer understanding of what salvation is and who it is for.

There are others who maybe you grew up in church like me and you have heard this gospel message hundreds of times, but still doubt your salvation from time to time. I used to say I was going to be a minister of doubt when I grew up because I would think to myself, “Am I really saved?” I struggled a lot with whether I believed or was this just something I grew up in. The preacher would say from time to time, “Do you know that you know that you know that you know?” and I used to think, “Well, I did until you put it like that!”

I hope today’s message will strengthen your faith and help you to see just how secure your salvation is.

There are others here and there is no doubt about it – you KNOW you are saved. Prayerfully, today will just be a reinforcement and a reminder of how good God is to save a wretched, vile sinner like yourself!

Wherever you fall, let’s unpack this a point at a time. First, let’s look at what this text teaches about: **Who can be saved?**

If this passage teaches us anything, it teaches us that anyone is a candidate for salvation. The Bible tells us that the two men that were crucified alongside Jesus (and just a reminder – this is a fulfillment of prophetic scripture).

Isaiah 53 – 700 years before Christ would ever be born describes the Messiah as being numbered with transgressors. This is what is taking place on the cross – Jesus is being numbered with transgressors.

Matthew's account tells us that Jesus was in the middle of these two criminals. Both Matthew and Mark refer to these men he is being crucified between as "robbers". They were thieves...the actual word used is "evil-doers". We'd call them thugs today.

In all likelihood they were revolutionaries...probably insurrectionists and whatever crime they had committed, it was a serious one because it deserved death by crucifixion.

Both criminals we are told hurled insults at Jesus. Luke's account only shares about one criminal yelling at him, but Mark says it was both!

Mark 15:27-32 – “And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left. ²⁹ And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, ³⁰ save yourself, and come down from the cross!” ³¹ So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. ³² Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.” Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.”

It's amazing to think about, really. One of these criminals went from reviling Jesus in one moment to coming to his defense the next. In one moment, he was crying out, "Save yourself and us" and shortly thereafter asking Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom – and Jesus said okay! "Today, you will be with me in paradise."

If there was ever a deathbed conversion this was it! And if there was ever a person NOT worthy of salvation, this was it! Think about it!

- There is nothing he could do to attempt to repay Jesus. (no service, no giving, no good works) - He would be dead in a matter of hours.
- He was being crucified because of choices he had made that were obviously not wise choices.

This guy didn't deserve salvation at all and yet at the 11th hour this man gets the exact same reward that was promised to his disciples in John 14 – "where I am you will be also." Doesn't seem fair, does it?

Now, we're going to talk about what changed in this man in just a moment, but again, I just want this to sit for a second. We're talking about WHO can be saved, and the answer from looking at this passage of scripture is that this thief is "exhibit A" that anyone can be saved...ANYONE.

Illus. Philip Yancey - I have as part of my routine in the morning as I am drinking coffee and preparing for the day to look at about several websites that I glean my news from. These include news sites like Fox News (gotta know what the right is saying) and then to CNN (gotta know what the left is saying) – I feel like I’m living in two different worlds after reading the headlines of these two sites – AMAZING!

Then I go local with the Houston Chronicle. Like to see what’s happening in H-town, and these days check in on how terrible the Rockets played. From there, I always go to the news source of *Christian Post* and *Christianity Today*. They report on what’s going on around our nation and around the world as it relates to the Church.

And this week, *Christianity Today* reported that author Philip Yancey was recently diagnosed with Parkinson’s. The title of the article was “The Gift I Didn’t Want”. It was a powerful piece that ended with this sentence: “I have written many words on suffering and now am being called to put them into practice. May I be a faithful steward of this latest chapter.”

I’ve always appreciated Yancey’s writings and in reading that article and studying this passage of scripture this week, I was jolted back to the very first book I ever read from Yancey called, *What’s So Amazing About Grace*. I went and pulled it off the shelf because he tells a story in chapter 8 – strange what you remember!

He tells a story that resonates with what we read and are talking about out in Luke chapter 23. He writes about Jeffrey Dahmer, the mass murderer...the serial killer who was known for cannibalizing his victims. This man was a sick man.

He was arrested in 1991 and sentenced to 15 consecutive life sentences. He was serving out that time and in Nov. of 1994 a fellow inmate killed him and one other person.

Seven months before his death though it’s reported and Dahmer mentioned it in several interviews that he had before his death that he had put his faith in Christ. He was baptized in a prison whirlpool, and the chaplain of the prison, a man by the name of Roy Ratcliff, he was a Church of Christ pastor met with him every Wednesday for Bible Study up until his death.

At his funeral, Ratcliff said about Dahmer:

“Jeff confessed to me his great remorse for his crimes. He wished he could do something for the families of his victims to make it right, but there was nothing he could do. He turned to God because there was no one else to turn to, but he showed great courage in his daring to ask the question, ‘Is heaven for me too?’ I think many people are resentful of him for asking that question. But he dared to ask, and he dared to believe the answer.”

Was Dahmer sincere? I have no idea? Many would look at this and say Jeffrey Dahmer – heaven? Come on. He gets the same heaven as Billy Graham? As Mother Teresa?

Only God knew Jeffrey Dahmer's heart, and he was just as much a candidate for the grace and mercy of God as this thief on the cross. The testimony of scripture and of life is God saving unlikely candidates.

Paul was a murderer...held the coats of the men stoning Stephen, the deacon. He said in **1 Tim. 1:15** – **“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”**

I think, Paul, I've got you beat...I bet Dahmer would have thought, I've got you beat...I bet that criminal on the cross thought, I've got you beat. I am the worst of the worst...and the good news of the gospel is, if you are thinking, “I've got you all beat.” Salvation is for you, too...it's for anyone and everyone who calls on the name of the Lord! The Bible says, “Whosoever will, let him come!”

Secondly, let's look at and answer: **How are we saved?**

Now, something happened in this man's life. We don't know what led to his change of heart, but we can certainly draw some conclusions.

First of all, he has seen AND heard Jesus as Jesus has been beaten and mocked, spit upon and nailed to the cross. Jesus didn't revile in return.

He didn't see any anger swelling up in Jesus or hear any cursing coming from the lips of Jesus. Instead, he heard cries of forgiveness. It's what we looked at last week, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.”

Maybe what caused this criminal to pause and consider Jesus was different was the sign that they put on the cross of Jesus. Maybe reading that sign is what softened his heart.

Luke 23:38 – **“There was an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”**

It was actually written in three different languages. John gives us a bit more insight into the sign and how that title was attributed to Jesus.

John 19:16b-22 – **“...So they took Jesus, and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but rather, ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’” Pilate answered, “What I have written I have written.”**

We don't know why Pilate all the sudden bowed up, but he did...he had been a coward earlier, giving the chief priests exactly what they wanted...but here he draws the line.

And he has them write: “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews”. Someone rightly referred to this as the first gospel tract! Maybe this criminal whose life we see changing before our eyes saw the name of Jesus...his very name means salvation!

Remember at his birth? The angel announces to Joseph in **Matt. 1:21** – “**She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.**”

Maybe in seeing this sign and seeing his name – this is one of the few times in scripture that someone who doesn’t have a relationship with Jesus actually refers to him by name – usually it’s “teacher or rabbi” - but here, this man cries out Jesus!

We can see in him calling out his name, that he could just be calling out to be saved! Listen to author **Max Lucado** ponder what led to this man’s change of heart:

He (The criminal) looks at the huddle of soldiers throwing dice in the dirt, gambling for a ragged robe. He sees a sign above Jesus’s head. It’s painted with sarcasm: King of the Jews. They mock him as a king. If he were crazy, they would ignore him. If he had no followers, they’d turn him away. If he were nothing to fear, they wouldn’t kill him. You only kill a king if he has a kingdom. Could it be...”

The reality is we don’t know what led to this man’s change of heart, but here is what we do know...this criminal teaches us how we can be saved. If you want to know HOW to be saved, THIS is the way. We must:

1. Acknowledge our sin

Luke 23:41a – “**And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds...**”

This criminal is saying “Guilty! Guilty as charged! You don’t see him making excuses...you don’t see him blaming his mom and dad or whining about being a product of his environment.

The very first thing this man does is acknowledge his own sinfulness! This is the first step in biblical salvation. It’s understanding that you are...that I am...that we are all sinners!

Romans 3:23 – “**for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.**”

Donald Barnhouse – “**This must be the position of anyone who is going to be saved. As long as we cling to our own selves and think that there is even a shred of righteousness in ourselves that could satisfy the demands of a holy God, there is no possibility for salvation. But when we recognize that we have sinned...then we are in a position of those who may obtain mercy.**”

Notice too, that this man does NOT just acknowledge his sin...he recognizes and understands that Jesus is sinless!

That's the second part of **Luke 23:41** – **“And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.”**

We must confess our sinfulness AND Jesus's innocence – his holiness – that he is the son of God! This is what the Spirit of God allowed this criminal to at least articulate even if he didn't understand it fully.

And look, we need to understand underneath ALL of this is the Spirit of God at work in this man's life...no doubt about it!

John 6:44 – **“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him...”**

God is drawing this man to salvation – and without his drawing not a soul is coming to Jesus! The deal is, when he draws, you have to listen...don't say “no” to the Spirit of God!

Both criminals heard Jesus...saw Jesus...but only one responded to the Spirit of Jesus!

J.C. Ryle – **“Both were equally near to Christ. Both saw and heard all that happened, during the six hours that He hung on the cross. Both were dying men, and suffering acute pain. Both were alike wicked sinners, and needed forgiveness. Yet one died in his sins, as he had lived, hardened impenitent, and unbelieving. The other repented, believed, cried to Jesus for mercy and was saved.”**

What a beautiful picture we are given here. Salvation takes root in our heart when we realize we are guilty...he is innocent...and as a result of him taking on our guilt at the cross, we become innocent.

This is the gospel! It's what the reformer, Martin Luther called it the “Great Exchange”. It's summed up in the truth of **2 Cor. 5:21** – **“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”**

We are saved by acknowledging our sin, but then secondly we must:

2. Acknowledge our need for a Savior

Luke 23:42-43 – **“And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”**

Note the simplicity of acknowledging your need for a Savior. This thief did not have to take a theology course...he didn't have to pass a test, be confirmed or baptized. He didn't have to repeat a prayer.

His salvation was simple...and it came by simple FAITH! We can see the humility in this “ask” – which by the way, we will never acknowledge our sin or need of a Savior if humility isn't present in our life.

We see humility here in that this man doesn't request to be honored (James and John)...he doesn't even ask to be recognized...he just says, "Remember me."

This man knew he was out of all other options! See, that's our problem sometimes. The reality is, many don't turn to Christ because they ALWAYS have somewhere else to turn! We can just go to:

- The next relationship...
- The next hit or high of some kind...
- The next drink...
- The next deal...

NOT this man! He knew he was desperate...he knew he needed to be saved...and he KNEW he couldn't save himself! And so, in simple faith, he turns to Jesus and says, "Remember me." This was his "prayer of salvation!" And does Jesus respond?

You better believe he does! He ALWAYS responds to humility and faith...ALWAYS! And he says, "Truly I say to you...that word truly there, put the word "Amen". Confirmed.

Jesus in effect says, you can take this to the bank! "TODAY, you will be WITH ME in paradise." TODAY!

NOT tomorrow...NOT after some holding area where you make amends for your life...nothing about purgatory here! "TODAY" you will be WITH ME IN PARADISE.

- Who can be saved? ANYONE
- How are we saved? Acknowledge our sin and our need of a Savior – simple faith here! NO WORKS INCLUDED.

Lastly, let's look at and answer: **What is life after death going to be like?**

Well, in one word, it's paradise. It's another name for heaven. It's another name that was used for the Garden of Eden. What makes these places paradise?

Yes, they are beautiful and all our needs will be met. It will be a place of perfection and one that it is wholly good. But what really makes it paradise is that it's where the presence of God dwells with man – unhindered fellowship with God! That's paradise!

When Jesus says, "You will be with me in Paradise" he is telling that man that they would be in close, personal fellowship with me– TODAY!

THIS is what we have to look forward to. To be absent from the body is to present (at home) with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8), and one blessed day, in the future to come God has promised for

those that have acknowledged their sin and their need of a Savior, we will be at home in Paradise with him forever and ever.

Rev. 21:1-4 – “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. (Paradise) ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

A word of salvation – written in RED – the red blood that was poured out so that we could be SAVED.

Illus. There is a fountain – This week as I was preparing this message, I couldn’t help but be reminded of the hymn by William Cowper , *There is a Fountain Filled with Blood*.

Cowper himself has an amazing story. He suffered from mental illness and severe depression his entire life...he had tried to commit suicide on multiple occasions.

For 18 months he was in an insane asylum and it was during this time that gave himself to the scriptures. And one day after reading the book of Romans, in that asylum at the age of 33, he acknowledged his sin and acknowledged Jesus as his Savior.

But, like many who suffer from mental illness and depression, Cowper continued to have his ups and downs. He struggled with his eternal security...he constantly doubted God’s love for him, even believing that he had lost his salvation. It was during this time and eight years AFTER his conversion that he wrote this hymn:

The lyrics: **There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins; and sinners plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains.**

Do you remember the second verse? **The dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day; and there may I, though vile as he, wash all my sins away. Wash all my sins away, wash all my sins away; and there may I, though vile as he, wash all my sins away.**

When we take of the Lord’s Supper today, we are acknowledging that we have come under the fountain of his blood.

Are you saved? If so, you can receive this supper with us. If, why don’t you receive the same promise today that Jesus made all those years ago to that thief on the cross.

Let’s pray.

Please Note: This document is not meant to be a published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.