

# The Criminal

Conversions at Calvary – Part I

Luke 23:33-43

## Introduction

The last words of famous people have been recorded for centuries, and often provide a revelation of the person's true nature.

P. T. Barnum, of Barnum and Bailey's Circus, asked one of his associates who had just come in from the circus in New York a question that ended up being his last words, "What were the receipts from Madison Square Garden?"<sup>i</sup>

The famous short story writer O. Henry borrowed the refrain from a song as he said his last words, "Turn up the lights. I don't want to go home in the dark."<sup>ii</sup>

Houdini, the escape artist, died of appendicitis, not from the legendary punch to his stomach. Just before Houdini died, this man who was famous for escaping almost anything said, "I guess this thing is going to get me."<sup>iii</sup>

Voltaire, the French deist and opponent of Christianity, was asked on his deathbed if he would change his mind and recognize the deity of Jesus Christ. He would have nothing of it and exclaimed, "In the name of God, please let me die in peace."<sup>iv</sup>

There are none so tragic and more famous than the dying words of Elizabeth I, Queen of England, who said just before she died, "All my possessions for a moment of time."<sup>v</sup>

Deathbed confessions have been an interesting revelation to the public. I have read several recent examples.

The famous Jewish musician Naomi Shemer admitted on her deathbed a few years ago that her best-selling song about Jerusalem was really a tune from an old Spanish lullaby which she had plagiarized.<sup>vi</sup>

Chris Spurling confessed that his famous Loch Ness Monster photograph was fabricated. He used a toy submarine to which he had molded a long neck and small head, and then taken to the lake and photographed. He convinced a doctor friend of what he had seen and allowed him to independently develop the photograph, which added to its credibility and created a media firestorm. Recently,

at the age of 94, suffering from cancer, he confessed it was all a hoax.<sup>vii</sup>

This past year, a deathbed confession solved the case of a murdered man. James Brewer had fled the neighborhood, taken on a new identity, gotten married, and became active in church and Bible studies. Thirty years later, after he suffered a serious stroke and was told he had very little time to live, he called for the police and confessed to the crime that had weighed on his conscience for so long. The only problem with this deathbed confession was that instead of dying, he completely recovered and is now serving time in Tennessee. The moral of this story is that deathbed confessions work out a lot better for you if you die.<sup>viii</sup>

In my view, one of the more tragic deathbed confessions was a letter written by Senator Ted Kennedy to the Pope. It was hand delivered by President Obama this past fall when he visited the Vatican.

Kennedy had hoped to repair his relationship with the Catholic Church as he lay dying of cancer at 77 years of age. In spite of his pro-abortion record throughout his tenure, he wrote about his record of helping the poor and keeping his faith. He asked for prayer as he admitted he was an imperfect human preparing for "the next passage of life." Without any gospel remedy or biblical hope in the return letter, the Pope's reply came, dictated, of course, through his assistant. The Pope thanked Kennedy for the letter, expressed concern for his illness, and then closed the brief letter with these words, "Commending you and the members of your family to the loving intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary."<sup>ix</sup>

How tragic this is. It is one thing to not hear the gospel of Jesus Christ while alive; it is another to not hear it when about to die.

The most well known deathbed confession, the most famous of all last words from the lips of a human being – in fact, the most often repeated words of a dying man – are actually found in scripture. These words came from the lips of a condemned felon, and the response of Jesus Christ to this man's deathbed confession gives us a library of gospel truth, forgiveness, and hope.

We find this scene in the Gospel by Luke, chapter 23.

Today, and in our next discussion, we will watch the conversion of two men – two unlikely men – and will call this series, “Conversions at Calvary”.

## Crucifixion at Calvary

Let us set the stage of this incredible encounter by first noticing verse 33 of Luke 23.

*When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left.*

The name “Calvary” comes from the Latin word “calvaria,” the Greek word used in this text is the word that gives us our word “cranium,” and the corresponding Aramaic word is “Golgotha”. All three words – Calvary, cranium, and Golgotha – when literally translated, mean “the skull”.

Crucifixions took place in this region on a hillside everyone knew simply as “The Skull”.

This name is never explained in the New Testament. The hillside may have physically resembled a human skull, as does a hillside near the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem where many believe Christ was crucified. It is possible that the name simply grew out of the ugly facts of this execution.<sup>x</sup>

Understand that the cross was actually a permanent fixture on this hillside. The vertical piece was stationary and permanent, and there were probably a dozen or more at The Skull.

The criminal would not carry his cross through the cobblestoned streets as depicted in the typical pictures and movies. The cross would weigh as much as three hundred pounds or more.

Instead, the condemned would carry the horizontal cross beam on his shoulders. He would arrive at The Skull carrying this beam, which would have weighed around one hundred pounds.

The beam was hollowed out in the center and then slipped over the vertical beam. After the victim’s hands were nailed to the crossbeam, his arms were raised and the top beam was lowered onto the vertical beam by means of a mortise and tenon joint.

The cross was actually much shorter than the romanticized Latin version that we imagine. The common cross was no taller than six feet. The criminals would have been within close proximity to those who came to mock, hit, or spit in their faces.

The Persians invented this form of execution because they worshiped Mother Earth. They did not want to pollute their goddess with the dying flesh of the condemned, so they created this elevated system of execution.

The Romans were said to have horribly perfected what the Persians invented.

One thing the Romans added to the vertical piece of wood, known as the “stipes,” was a smaller block of wood. This block of wood nailed into the vertical “stipes” was called a “saddle” (a “sedulum” in Latin).

The saddle was nailed halfway up the vertical beam and the criminal was propped upon it so the nails would not tear through his hands, usually at the wrists, or his feet, usually through his ankles.

Upon this saddle, the criminal could rest his weight throughout the entire ordeal.<sup>xi</sup>

The “sedulum” actually prolonged the suffering, allowing the victim to live for a longer period of time. Those who were crucified usually died from a loss of blood from the beating they had received, along with hunger and thirst. One author commented that many criminals were known to have hung on a cross for up to a week until they died, raving mad.<sup>xii</sup>

This was such a horrific way to die that cultured Gentiles rarely mentioned the word “cross” in their vocabulary. It is little wonder that the word for extreme pain and suffering, “excruciating,” comes from the Latin word that means, “out of the cross”.<sup>xiii</sup>

Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, informs us that in the year of our Lord’s death, more than a thousand people were crucified by Rome.

Often, before the person died, the cross would be needed for another criminal standing in line, so to speak. If the soldiers wanted the criminals taken down and they were not yet dead, they would break their legs and push them off the saddle so they would not be able to raise themselves up to breathe and would quickly die.

This is exactly what will happen to the two thieves hanging beside Jesus.

However, the prophets said that not one bone would be broken of the Messiah, but that He would instead be pierced (Psalm 34:20 and Zechariah 12:10).

We have to look all the way back in Exodus chapter 12 and Numbers chapter 9 to find that in the sacrifice of the Passover lamb, the Israelites were to sacrifice without breaking any of the lamb’s bones.

Jesus Christ is *the* Lamb of God, who came to be sacrificed for the atonement of our sins forever, and He will not have one bone broken as He pictures for us the final Passover sacrifice.

Luke informs us that this Passover Lamb – the final Passover Lamb – is not only enduring crucifixion, but vile mockery and rejection.

Matthew's gospel informs us that the high priests, scribes, and elders are at this scene mocking Him.

In other words, their utter hatred of Christ led them to actually set aside their dignity, travel up this hill, and mock the condemned Lord.

Luke shows them fully participating and even inciting the mob further in verse 35 of chapter 23.

***And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ [that is, the Messiah] of God, His chosen One."***

By the way, this is not a veiled affirmation of His ability to have saved others, but a denial. The rulers are making sure the people connect with the fact that if He could not save Himself, then all the others He supposedly saved were not really saved either.<sup>xiv</sup>

However, they missed the point, did they not?

No Israelite ever stood around their dinner table hurling insults at their Passover lamb. No Jew ever ranted and raved at the inability of the Passover lamb to save itself from death.

No, they rejoiced in the death of the lamb which allowed them to live.

However, according to this verse, the rulers and people are mocking the Lord, saying, "Save Yourself to prove You can save us."

Their mockery is absurd. The Passover lamb does not prove his worth by resisting death, but by dying a substitutionary death.

The fact that Jesus could have, but refused to come down from the cross fulfills His purpose in coming as the Lamb of God who came to die for the sins of the world (I John 2:2). It is by the very fact that Jesus did *not* save Himself that He can save us!

This redemptive irony of the gospel is about to be personalized in a very unique way.

## Conversion at Calvary – the Criminal

Luke has already informed us in verse 33 of chapter 23 that Christ was crucified between two thieves.

Matthew adds that both thieves had the ability to watch Christ, to hear His prayer for the forgiveness of His executioners, to hear Him address God as His Father – an unheard of intimacy – and read Pilate's superscription (Matthew 27).<sup>xv</sup>

It was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek,

***. . . "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."  
(Matthew 27:37)***

Both of these thieves took it all in and, while suffering unbelievable pain and on their way to certain death, ended up joining in and shouting to Jesus to save Himself and also them.

However, when Jesus offered them no escape and made no reply, they joined in the mockery of what they perceived to be Christ's inability.<sup>xvi</sup>

How could one mock a dying man while they are dying themselves?

This is the drama of redemption, played out on three crosses.

There is little doubt that even the arrangement of crosses was staged to further humiliate Christ. They hung Him between two criminals so that the crowd would identify Him as nothing more than a religious fraud, finally exposed.

However, they overlooked the fact that even this was a prophetic fulfillment. Isaiah had prophesied that the Messiah would be . . .

***. . . numbered with the transgressors  
(Isaiah 53:12)***

In other words, He would die with criminals.

Now the word used for these two criminals by Luke identifies them as evil workers.

Matthew's gospel uses a word that is more specific to their evil doing. It is the Greek word "lestes" (λησταις), which identifies them as robbers.<sup>xvii</sup>

This word, however, refers to much more than simple thievery. It is a word that was reserved for hardened criminals who did not just steal, but did so with violence.

It is also a word that was used to refer to a revolutionary; that is, someone who stole from the

government in order to not only cripple it, but support their cause.

This is the same word that was used to describe Barabbas.

There is little doubt that these two criminals were companions of Barabbas. He would have been hanging on the cross that Jesus now occupied.

Barabbas was more than likely intended for the cross in the center.<sup>xviii</sup>

Jesus Christ literally took his place!

He also took your place and mine. For all who believe, Christ suffered the wrath of God on their behalf. Peter wrote,

*. . . [Christ] bore our sins in His body on the cross . . . (I Peter 2:24)*

According to Mark's gospel, one of these revolutionaries never let up with his insults and mockery.

He expressed no concern for God, no guilt, no repentance, no concern for forgiveness. And he would hear no word from Jesus – no warning, no argument, no promise – only silence as he raged on against the Lamb.<sup>xix</sup>

Notice as Luke records a conversation between these two former comrades in verse 39.

*One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!"*

Mark's gospel, in chapter 15, informs us that both of these men were saying these things. However, one of them eventually stopped – evidently troubled, convicted, anguished, guilty, awed, and convinced.

Notice verse 40.

*But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"*

In other words, "Shouldn't you stop insulting this man and start thinking about the fact that you are about to meet God?! Have you somehow overlooked the fact that you are dying too?!"

Notice further, in verse 41,

*And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.*

Something was happening in the heart of this other thief – something miraculous, something marvelous.

This is the posture of repentance and faith.

Saying, "We are being punished justly," is admitting:

- I am a sinner;
- I have no merit;
- I deserve to die;
- I am bankrupt with nothing good to offer to God.

Do not fail to notice his confession in verse 41b.

*. . . this man has done nothing wrong.*

There on that hill stands the highest court of Israel – the Sanhedrin – hearing a rebuke from a condemned felon.

I could not help but think of the fact that it was through ceremonially unclean shepherds that the news of Christ's birth was announced to the world. And at His death, it is through the lips of a sinner, condemned and unclean, that the innocence of Christ would be stated, along with the declaration that He was indeed the long-awaited King with a coming kingdom!

Now, two of the most profound statements ever communicated between the Savior and a sinner occur in the next few lines of scripture.

Look at verse 42.

*. . . "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom!"*

During the hours that they hung there, this criminal had studied the placard, mulled over the meaning of the words, and by faith, believed.

"Lord, it says You are King of the Jews. I believe. Remember me when You come into Your kingdom!"

Is he kidding?! To this thief, in the presence of the religious leaders that he may well have been working to elevate by his revolution against the Roman occupation, in defiance of their mockery of Christ's claim, in opposition to his comrade with whom he had risked his life over and over again, against every possible evidence that he could see, Jesus was surely anything but a Messiah, anything but a real King, anything but the heir to a kingdom.

"C'mon, are you blind?"

"No, I once was blind, but now I see."

What faith it took for this dying man to trust a dying King!<sup>xx</sup>

Are you saying today, “If I only had evidence that Christ was really the Son of God and the coming King, I’d believe.”?

No, you would not. You do not lack evidence; you lack interest. You lack the willingness to humbly admit that you are a sinner who is going to meet God, and you are not ready!

Against everything that could be seen, by faith this dying thief trusted that the dying man beside him was actually the King who would reign in His coming kingdom.

What a conversion!

This is the most unlikely person at the most unlikely place, and he is about to receive the most unlikely promise.

Jesus now turns His bloodied face toward this repentant sinner and says, in verse 43,

. . . ***“Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.”***

Let me make four observations about Jesus Christ’s statement.

**1. First, this was an authoritative promise.**

Jesus said,

. . . ***“Truly I say to you . . .”***

“Truly” is another way of saying “truthfully”. In other words, “This is the truth!”

We cannot miss the irony of this in the midst of the crucifixion scene. Jesus just so happens to be in the process of being crucified for being a liar; an imposter; a fake. The highest court of Israel has condemned Him for lying about who He was.

They would have expected Jesus to answer the thief with something like, “It’s time for Me to come clean. I’m sorry for taking My claims to be the Son of God too far. Listen pal, I really can’t do anything for you. There’s no need to keep up the charade.”

No, Jesus Christ says, effectively, “You’re going to go to heaven with Me, and *that’s* the truth.”

**2. Secondly, this was an authoritative promise with an immediate transition.**

Notice further that Jesus said,

. . . ***“Truly I say to you, today . . .”***

Today!

Christ promises immediate consciousness of life today!<sup>xxi</sup>

There is no limbo; there is no soul sleep; there is no purgatory first. Jesus says, “I’m telling you the truth – you’re going to die today, and today there will

be an immediate transition of your spirit from earth to glory.”

This thief was hoping for some kind of help in the future, but Jesus Christ gave him forgiveness and a passport to heaven that very day!<sup>xxii</sup>

Imagine – this thief is agonizing over every breath, his eyes are burning, his body is aching, and he hears from Christ an authoritative pronouncement of an immediate transition.

**3. Thirdly, this was an authoritative promise with an immediate transition by means of an intimate connection.**

Jesus said to this thief,

. . . ***“Truly, I say to you, today you shall be with Me . . .”***

I imagine the crowd roared with laughter as Jesus gasped out such a promise.

“Yea, you’ll be with Him all right – food for worms!”

By what right could this condemned sinner ever hope to live with the King in His kingdom?

This is the gospel, my friend.

**• The gospel of Christ is offered to undeserving sinners.**

It is offered to those who, like this thief, say, “We are justly condemned.”

**• The gospel of Christ is not guaranteed by works.**

This thief could do absolutely nothing to earn his way into Paradise or even show Jesus Christ how thankful he was that he was forgiven.

He could not join a church, get baptized, or give money to charity. He had no time to get cleaned up, reformed, or even prove that he had repented of his old lifestyle. He could not set his criminal record straight, make restitution to the Roman Empire, or even apologize to those from whom he had stolen. He could not do one thing for God, country, family, religion, or mankind.

This thief literally could not do anything but die, and he was only hours away.

However, because of his deathbed confession, he would die with an authoritative pronouncement of an immediate transition by means of an intimate connection.

**4. Fourthly, this was an authoritative promise with an immediate transition by means of an intimate connection that led to a glorious destination.**

Jesus said,

. . . *“Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.”*

The word “Paradise” means a “garden,” typically referring to a walled garden which is protected and beautiful.

This was the word chosen to speak to this man, one of the last Old Testament saints, of the coming glory of heaven.

When a king in this day and time wished to bestow upon one of his subjects a very special honor, he made him, what was called, “a companion of the garden”. This meant he was chosen to walk in the royal gardens with the king himself.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Jesus was basically answering this thief with more than a word; He was graciously saying to this bankrupt sinner, “Yes, you will be with me, the King, in My coming kingdom.”

The godly British evangelical bishop of the 1800s, John Ryle, wrote of this text,

*Was He condemned, though innocent? It was that we might be acquitted, though guilty. Did He wear a crown of thorns? It was that we might wear the crown of glory. Was He stripped of His raiment? It was that we might be clothed in everlasting righteousness. Was He mocked and reviled? It was that we might be honored and blessed. Was He reckoned a sinner and numbered among the transgressors? It was that we might be reckoned innocent, and justified from all sin. Did He die at last, the most painful and disgraceful of deaths? It was that we might live for evermore, exalted to the highest glory.*<sup>xxiv</sup>

We cannot see the gospel played out any more clearly in scripture than while Christ was on the cross – delivering grace and mercy to a condemned, dying sinner who, by faith, made a true and genuine confession.

The dying words of the devout astronomer and believer Copernicus were these: “I do not ask You, Lord, for the grace that You gave the Apostle Paul; nor can I dare ask for the grace that You granted the Apostle Peter; but, the mercy and grace which You showed to the dying thief, show that to me.”<sup>xxv</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Ray Robinson, Famous Last Words (Workman Publishing, 2003), p. 7.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>vi</sup> <http://listverse.com/2009/09/29/top-10-fascinating-deathbed-confessions/>

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> David Gibson, “Ted Kennedy to Pope Benedict,” Politics Daily (Aug. 29, 2009).

<sup>x</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, Luke: Be Courageous (Victor Books, 1989), p. 135.

<sup>xi</sup> William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, and Floyd E. Hosmer, “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ,” The Journal of the American Association (1986), p. 1458.

<sup>xii</sup> William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke (Westminster, 1975), p. 285.

<sup>xiii</sup> R. Kent Hughes, Luke: Volume 2 (Crossway Books, 1998), p. 381.

<sup>xiv</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel (Augsburg Publishing House, 1943), p. 1113.

<sup>xv</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, The Bible Exposition Commentary: Volume 1 (Victor Books, 2001), p. 275.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid., p. 1114.

<sup>xvii</sup> Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 84.

<sup>xviii</sup> James Montgomery Boice, The Gospel of Matthew: Volume 2 (Baker books, 2001), p. 616.

<sup>xix</sup> Hughes, p. 384.

<sup>xx</sup> Wiersbe, Bible Exposition Commentary, p. 275.

<sup>xxi</sup> Trent C. Butler, Holman New Testament Commentary: Luke (Holman, 2000), p. 396.

<sup>xxii</sup> Wiersbe, Bible Exposition Commentary, p. 276.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Barclay, p. 287.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Boice, p. 618.

<sup>xxv</sup> Hughes, p. 385.