

Why Easter Matters Session 3: Leader Guide

Session Three Overview:

This session we're going to talk about a character whose life spun out of control by the time his path crossed with Jesus'. We don't know how old he was. We don't know his name. But we do know he ended up in a Roman jail cell.

He was condemned to death because he was so violent and unpredictable, he couldn't even be trusted as a slave. He couldn't even be trusted to row a Roman galley. His only value was to illustrate the futility of defying Rome. They condemned him to death by crucifixion as a warning to others who might consider breaking Rome's laws.

This man had seen crucifixions. He'd seen the aftermath of crucifixions. He knew exactly what he was in for. He would fight and curse and scream. He would be defiant, but death would eventually take him. His body would be taken from the cross, put on a wagon, carted to the south side of Jerusalem into the valley of Gehenna, and left in the city dump because no one would be given permission to claim it.

But this man decided he would die the way he lived: defiantly. And on the morning, they dragged him out of that jail cell, he discovered two other people would be crucified that same day. One was another criminal, like himself. The other was Jesus, the Jewish rabbi from Nazareth.

It's important to understand that crucifixion was a terrible way to die. It was hours and hours of pain, terror, and humiliation. In some instances, it took two or three days for a crucified person to die.

As all of this misery was taking place, the two criminals heard Jesus say about the people gathered to watch these executions, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). While the crowd mocked him and the Roman soldiers split up

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everything he owned and gambled to see who could win all of it back, Jesus prayed for them. People had gathered from all over town because everyone came to see a crucifixion. There's something about tragedy and pain that is embarrassingly fascinating. We can't look away.

But it wasn't just the common people of Jerusalem who had come to see Jesus die. The rulers—the very people that had Jesus arrested and crucified—were there. And these rulers sneered at him, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One;" (Luke 23:35). This was the group of people that had the most to lose from Jesus' success. From now on, they were in charge and this was their moment to take revenge.

The soldiers joined in as well. In Hollywood movie crucifixions, the crosses rise high from the ground and everyone looks up at the people being crucified. That's not how the Romans did it. They crucified people about six inches off the ground because the point of crucifixion was humiliation. These Roman soldiers were able to walk right up to Jesus, almost face to face. They were able to scream in his face and spit on him. They taunted Jesus: "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself" (**Luke 23:37**).

The two criminals joined in as well. Now, here's an interesting detail: Luke wrote in his Gospel that one of the criminals hurled insults at Jesus (**Luke 23:39**). Remember, Luke was a Greek doctor who became a Christian years after the resurrection and wrote his Gospel by interviewing eyewitnesses. But when Matthew, who was one of the 12 disciples and an eyewitness to these events, wrote his Gospel, he said both criminals turned their anger away from the crowd and toward Jesus (**Matthew 27:44**).

Take a moment and imagine this: Everyone in the crowd—the rulers, the soldiers, even the two criminals being crucified on either side of him—are mocking and insulting Jesus. Some of them are spitting on him. There was a reason Jesus had stirred this level of rage. Luke captures it in his Gospel:

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" **Luke 23:39**

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Wasn't Jesus supposed to be able to do something about this? If he was the Messiah, couldn't he save himself and the criminals? And then suddenly in the middle of all of that chaos and pain, the criminal stops shouting insults because something so unimaginable happens that he recognizes in an instant there's something different about this crucified rabbi:

Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." **Luke 23:34**

And it dawns on the criminal that Jesus is a righteous man, sent from God. He confronts the other criminal:

"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 23:39-41

Here was a man suffering unjustly, but who still believed that God could be called Father. Jesus was not drawing conclusions about God based on the way life and others were treating him. Suddenly, for the criminal, there was a new category. He was beginning to see Jesus in a way that no one in the crowd was seeing him.

In the final moments of his life, Jesus had a conversation with a criminal not a righteous man. This was possibly one of the least righteous men in Jerusalem. That criminal had realized that if an innocent man suffering like a guilty man could maintain faith in God, then a guilty man who deserved his punishment ought to be able to do the same. And in that moment, the criminal realized that Jesus really was the Messiah.

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." **Luke 23:42-43**

The criminal asked Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom, not because of anything the criminal had done but in spite of everything he'd done. If Jesus could maintain faith in a good and just God in the midst of those terrible circumstances, perhaps there was a good and just God after all.

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Jesus' answer that the criminal would be with him in paradise is important for us to hear. Jesus didn't say that because the criminal had rededicated his life. Rededicating your life while you're hanging from a cross is meaningless. There is no turning over a new leaf when you're going to spend the remaining few hours of your life nailed to a tree. All the criminal could offer was a desperate plea for grace and mercy.

Jesus was merciful because his thoughts about us are not reflected in what's happening to us. His love for us is not reflected in our circumstances. What if it's true that God is not your personal experience? What if God loves you even when life has left you broken?

Session 3 Discussion Questions:

1. Did you grow up in a faith tradition that observed Lent? If so, what was your experience? Does observing Lent currently play a role in your spiritual experience of Easter? If not, could it?
2. In general, do you think of God as being pleased with you or disappointed in you? What has shaped those assumptions about God's view of you?
3. Have you ever felt disappointed with God because you were in a disappointing season of life? If so, what happened?
4. Read Luke 23:42-43 aloud together. What do you think about Jesus accepting the criminal even though he was beyond the point of being able to change his life? Does it seem fair to you? What implications might it have in your own life?
5. What if it's true that God is not your personal experience? What if God loves you even when life has left you broken? How might that change the way you live out your faith?
6. In what ways do you still try to earn God's love? What are some practical things you can do to accept the grace He freely offers and to obey Him, not in order to earn His love, but because He already loves you?