

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

<sup>40</sup> But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? <sup>41</sup> We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

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

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

### Don’t You Fear God?

Dear Friends in Christ,

Do you know who Chester A. Arthur and Julia Sands were? I suppose you might recall Chester A. Arthur, but you don’t know Julia Sands...unless you are or were a history teacher. Chester A. Arthur was the 21st president of the United States. He took over when President James Garfield was assassinated in 1881. His career took an ironic twist when he inherited the presidency. You see, no one expected him to ever be president. He was only put on the ticket to heal a split in the Republican party. Even though Arthur had been a Republican for years, the previous president—also a Republican—had fired him from his job as the collector of customs in New York City. That was the richest government job in America then, and it was considered to be a fountain of corruption.

Arthur didn’t do anything strictly illegal, but he made a lot of money there. He hired a lot of Republican cronies to unnecessary, well-paying jobs. So when the brand new president died, many people thought the best thing Arthur could do for America would be to resign. However, a young woman named Julia Sands wrote him a series of letters calling on him to defy everyone’s expectations and be a good president.

Arthur took her letters to heart and persuaded Congress to pass reform legislation that included his old job, and then he vigorously enforced that legislation. He shocked friend and foe alike by permanently changing the way American government ran. Today/Tonight, we have before us another man whose words would’ve shocked anyone who knew him. His words bring us another irony of the passion. He said, **Don’t you fear God?**

Unlike the story of President Arthur, the account of the criminal who said these words is well-known, even though we don’t actually know his name. But don’t let familiarity blind you to the irony in these words: **Don’t you fear God?** Because a dying criminal came to faith on a cross.

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You know where we are in the story: after trying almost every way possible to free Jesus, Pontius Pilate finally condemned him to die, and the Roman soldiers marched him out to Calvary. Crucifixions required serious logistical support. You needed poles, cross beams, nails, and ropes. You needed soldiers to guard the prisoners and to keep

order, because crowds gathered to watch crucifixions. So ordinarily there was a delay between the time when the sentence was passed and when it was finally carried out, but the Jewish leaders wanted Jesus dead that day. More importantly, God wanted his Son to die on that Friday, so Jesus went immediately to the cross. On that day there were two other criminals in prison awaiting execution. Ever models of efficiency, the Romans crucified these men along with Jesus.

As soon as he was nailed to his cross, Jesus' enemies began to mock him. ***"If you are the Christ, save yourself!"*** And both of these criminals joined in. Luke tells us that they even echoed the words of the Jewish leaders: ***"Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"*** You may have noticed that Luke says *one* criminal said that, but Matthew and Mark reveal that both of them mocked Jesus. So both men started out, at least, saying things like this. What better way to mock Jesus than to throw his own words back in his face? ***"Come on, Christ! Use that miraculous power of yours and save yourself and us!"*** Jesus was indeed the Christ, the promised Savior of Israel, and he *could have* come down from that cross. The reason he didn't was to save sinners like those men who were dying with him.

What kind of men were these criminals? The Bible doesn't spell out their crimes, but the Greek words it uses to describe them imply not only stealing but also violence, maybe even murder. They deserved the death penalty. But suddenly, one of them asked the other, ***"Don't you fear God . . . 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."*** **Don't you fear God?** Where did that question come from? If either of these men had feared God, they wouldn't have lived the way they did and found themselves in this position! But they were about to die. And God wrote into the heart of every human being a knowledge that God is going to judge us all when we die. So even in a hardened criminal, fear of facing God is not all that unusual.

The really surprising thing is that that wasn't everything this criminal confessed. He trusted in Jesus to take him to heaven when this horrible experience was over. How did he come to know his Savior?

You can point to the fact that most Jews were raised with religious instruction and that Jesus was the most famous man in Israel during the three years of his ministry. This man probably heard about some of what Jesus was teaching. He heard Jesus speak to the people on the way to Calvary and even ask God to forgive the soldiers who nailed him to the cross. Yet up until this moment, it doesn't seem like any of it had sunk in.

But now, as he was hanging from a cross, the Holy Spirit worked through the gospel he had likely heard in the synagogue, in the stories about Jesus, and in the words and actions of Christ that this criminal had heard and seen as he walked with Jesus to the cross. Through that gospel, the Holy Spirit reached into his heart and gave him faith right there on his own cross.

God has done the very same thing for you and me. Does that seem like kind of a forced comparison? I mean, when you look at this man dying because of his robbery and violence and maybe even murder, do you see yourself? Or do you think it's obvious that you aren't quite the kind of sinner he was? The truth is, you are. We are all sinners from birth. One of the greatest lies of our time is that we're all "good people" by nature. Our culture believes that there's a little good in all of us. If there are really bad people out there, they are limited to people like child molesters, serial killers, terrorists, and drug dealers. But you know what? It's all an illusion.

Even though we may have managed to keep from murdering anyone, we've all hated someone. We have wanted certain criminals to "get what they have coming." Even though we may never have stolen anything, have we never been lazy at work and in so doing, stolen from our employer? Have we ever been envious of what other people have? Have we ever resented the fact that God was more generous to other people than he was to us? To God, those sins of the heart are just as evil as the sins people act out. You are a robber and a murderer at heart...and so am I. The sin in our hearts contaminates everything we say and do. We are just as guilty as these men were, and we deserve the death and the hell that they deserved.

However, God has been every bit as generous to us as he was to that criminal. Jesus paid for all our hatred and murder, for all our greed and robbery, for all our sins of every kind. His blood washed it all away. He promises us what he promised that criminal—paradise with him. The same Holy Spirit worked through that same gospel to give us the same faith in our Savior as this dying criminal had. No one who knew this criminal would've expected him to make this confession. No one who truly understands how sinful our hearts are can fail to be surprised by God's grace when he gave *us* faith.

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Obviously, this man knew he was dying, and without that realization, he might never have come to see what the gospel promised him. Do you ever wonder how you would feel if you knew exactly when you were going to die? I wonder what I would think and feel. I hope it would show the faith this man showed when he asked, "**Don't you fear God?**"

Crucifixion was a horrible way to die. Do you know what usually killed the person? Suffocation. As the victims hung there on the cross, they had to push themselves up with their legs to get a full breath of air. As this process continued for hours, the victim became more and more tired. Each breath became harder to take. Slowly, their lungs filled with water, so each breath brought less and less oxygen. It made the victims have to work harder to draw deeper and faster breaths, but they burned more oxygen doing that. Eventually, they reached the point where they couldn't bring in oxygen fast enough, and they died. It was excruciatingly painful. Thirst tortured them. They were almost naked, exposed to heat and cold. And most of the time it took days to die. That's why Pilate sent soldiers to break their legs. If they couldn't push up with their legs, they suffocated faster. And that's why Pilate was surprised to learn that Jesus was dead after only three hours.

The soldiers did, however, have to break the legs of the other two men. I imagine they took something large and heavy and swung it to shatter the criminals' femurs. From the moment it all started, this criminal knew what he was in for. In all that pain, he found strength and comfort in Christ. At this point, he didn't ask to be rescued from the cross. He didn't try to bargain with Jesus and promise to turn over a new leaf. He didn't even ask Jesus to spare him some of the pain. He asked only one thing: ***"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*** He asked to go home to heaven.

And Jesus said, ***"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."*** That very day he would leave behind all that sin does to people here on earth and go home. He would be with Christ in heaven. That is the greatest joy of eternal life. And as this Christian hung on his own cross, as the hours dragged on and the pain increased, as Pilate gave the order for that final act of brutality and his life slipped away, the promise of the gospel kept his faith alive and brought him home. That same gospel led him to call another sinner to repent while he still had the physical strength. That is perhaps the last irony of this account. Who would ever expect a man in this situation to witness Christ to others? But God does wonderful, unexpected things even in the darkest moments.

In this man's final confession, we have a reminder that we too have our crosses. There is so much pain in this life. Many diseases, like cancer, are probably every bit as painful as crucifixion. And even if we don't face such horrible deaths, some of us may face pain that is terrible in other ways—spouses who are unfaithful, children who abandon us, abuse from parents, or addiction to drugs or alcohol. All the pain and sorrow of this life attack us and our faith. God never promised us that we would avoid the crosses he allows in our lives.

However, he did promise to limit our crosses to no more than what we can stand—like he did when he limited this man's crucifixion to only one day. God did promise to give us the strength we need to endure them.

As we meditate on Christ dying for us and as we hear his promise that on the day this life ends we will see him in paradise, God works in our hearts. He comforts us with his love. And he even gives us the strength to share our faith with those around us. When the time comes, those we love will take great comfort in hearing our confession that we are going home to Christ. Between now and then, God gives us the strength even in the most painful moments to point to our Savior.

It is truly amazing what God does for us. No one who followed Jesus out to Calvary that day expected to hear the confession this criminal gave. He didn't expect to give it himself when he began that last walk of his life. But God does miracles. He takes sinners like us and makes us his children. And he even carries us through death itself to eternal life. Trust in him for that—today and always. Amen.