

## Names of Wondrous Love—THE WAY

When you're ready to hit the road, how do you plan your trips? How do you decide what highways to travel, what roads to take? Are you one of those who heads over to AAA and grabs up Trip Tiks, Tour Guides and maps? Or do you use their smartphone apps? Maybe you just log on to the Internet, bring up Mapquest, and print out your turn-by-turn directions. Perhaps, like my dad, you've named the voice on your GPS unit which gives you audible directions plus a map. By the way, my dad named the female GPS voice "Faith." He likes to say that he gets where he's going by faith! Whatever your "system" is, you surely don't just turn the key, back out of the garage, and start driving. You plan the way very carefully so you don't get lost...or never get there at all.

How about the way to heaven? How are you going to get to that most important destination? Hopefully each of us can answer, *"There is only one way."* Hopefully each of us knows those important words of Jesus, ***"I am the way. . . . No one comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6)**. Today/Tonight, in our series of sermons on the wondrous names of Jesus, we have a text that reminds us of a most important name for him—THE WAY.

### Jesus is THE WAY

1. For sinners who have lost their way
2. Jesus is the only way

Listen to the words of Luke 23:39-43...

**One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "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." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."**

The two men crucified on either side of the Savior belonged there. According to Roman rule, they deserved the crosses on which they hung. They are described as criminals, men guilty of gross misdeeds and serious crimes. One of them put it this way: *"We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve."* Whether murder or rebellion, whether a member of a gang led by Barabbas, as some have suggested, or who knows what—that criminal recognized that his punishment fit his crimes. He and the other man were sinners who in the eyes of God and of human law had lost their way.

The same was not true at all of the One on the center cross! When the thief's partner joined in the cruel mockery of Jesus, he rebuked him saying, **"This man has done nothing wrong."** Looking at Jesus' silent suffering, listening to Jesus' remarkable prayer seeking forgiveness for those who were afflicting him, the thief had reached a conclusion. This Jesus was not a sinner who had lost his way.

But in fact, Jesus belonged on that cross. **"We all, like sheep, have gone astray,"** the prophet Isaiah reminds us, **"each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all"** (Isaiah 53:6). The holy Son of God was guilty, so guilty that his Father turned his back on him. The hair stands up on the back of our necks as we hear Jesus' horrible cry, **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"** (Matthew 27:46). Yes, guilty because the sins of the whole world were heaped upon him and hell was extracting its full dues from him. Guilty because he who had never lost his way was paying for every wayward thought, word and action of every sinner.

For a moment today/tonight, let's put ourselves into that dying criminal's place. We can't climb up on his cross, but we can stop to think how much like him we really are. We all were dying criminals, and we all had coming what our deeds deserved. You see, in God's judgment there is no scale of values when it comes to sin. Murder and muggings are not at the top of the list and immorality and idolatry down on the bottom. The heavenly judge doesn't arch his eyebrows in holy horror at adultery and abortion but merely wink at gossip and greed. Sin is sin in his eyes, and each sin has earned the sinner all the horrors of hell.

Do we really believe this? Each time we push God out of our minds...each time we reject his will or trade him for this world...each time we gossip about our neighbor or get greedy ideas about their money, fame or spouse...each time we hate and hurt and hit back at others...each time we have done such things, we, like that dying criminal, have fully earned hell. The more we realize how lost in sin we were, the more we'll appreciate the wondrous love that held the innocent Jesus to that center cross.

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That criminal not only saw that Jesus was innocent. With eyes of faith, he also saw that Jesus was his only way to heaven. We don't know how the penitent thief received faith. Was he trained in the promises of the coming Savior by pious parents in his youth, and now in his dying moments did he recall what he had once learned? Did Christ's words and actions on the way to and out on Calvary preach a mighty gospel sermon to him through which faith was worked? We aren't told, but it's not important because faith is always the Holy Spirit's working.

With eyes of faith the thief now looked at Jesus and prayed, **“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”** Look what he asked for—a share in Christ’s kingdom. Not the top position on the highest throne, just a thought of remembrance from Jesus, just a crumb of mercy, just a drop of his love. Gladly would he seize the crumbs from the master’s table. Gladly would he serve as a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord. *“Just remember me,”* he prayed, *“don’t let my sins bar the door, but remember me in your mercy.”* Alone that thief had to be deathly afraid to enter eternity and face the judgment of a holy God. But with Jesus remembering him, with his hand in the hand of Jesus, he would dare to face his God. The way to heaven—the ONLY way to heaven—that’s what the thief saw with eyes of faith opened by the Spirit when he looked at Jesus on the center cross.

The penitent thief asked for heaven, and look what the Lord gave him. **“I tell you the truth,”** the Savior said. When he who owns heaven and earth speaks, it’s as good as done. **“Today you will be with me in paradise.”** For three or four more hours that thief would draw his ragged breath in pain on that cross, but that very day his cross would be exchanged for a crown and his soul would be lifted up to heaven’s glory. **“With me,”** the Savior said. All heaven is in those two words. What more do we need to know about heaven than that it is to be with Christ and to share eternally in his love?! **“In paradise,”** the Savior concluded. That morning had seen the thief led out of his prison cell to pay his final debt to society. That afternoon saw him dying on the cross and fast approaching hell’s yawning jaws. But that evening saw him enjoying paradise with his Savior. His body, bloodied on that cross, with legs broken later that day to shock him into quicker death, buried who knows where in some pauper’s grave, would someday hear the Savior’s voice and join his soul once again in heaven. This was the promise from the Savior, who is the only way to heaven. And this is the glorious promise we have from the Savior, *our* only way to heaven. On that last great day when he returns, his mighty shout will empty all graves, glorify the raised bodies of all believers, and rejoin them with their souls to be with him forever in heaven.

By God’s grace we know the way to heaven. We’ve heard our Savior’s words: **“I am the way. . . . No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6).** We know what those words mean. Jesus is not just some sign pointing us in the right direction like the ones out on our highways. He is the road itself! He is THE WAY! We don’t need AAA, Mapquest, a smartphone or GPS to find our way to heaven. Jesus is the way, the only way to the Father’s home above. With his death and resurrection as payment for all sin, he made himself the THE WAY to heaven.

THE WAY—what a name of wondrous love our Jesus has! May the God of all grace keep our faith focused on him as we continue our journey to heaven. Amen.

Dearest Jesus,

We thank you for being THE WAY to heaven for us. Like the criminals who hung next to you on that Good Friday, we deserve punishment and death. But just as you did on Calvary that day, you have shown us mercy and promised us heaven by your sacrifice and death. Continually send your Holy Spirit to us that we may never rely on ourselves or anything else for our salvation, but always look to your complete sacrifice and your assurances that one day we too will be with you in paradise. Amen.