

“The End of Faith”

Scripture: Luke 23:33-43

Graphic: cross, thieves, end of the road, Jesus, circle

Key Verses: 23:42 Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Theme: The ‘end’ of our faith is the beginning of eternity with God – the assurance of salvation. That ‘end’ starts each morning you decide to be a follower of Jesus and trust him with your life. Give him your sin, trust in his saving grace, and look to him for salvation and abundant life.

1) Introduction

- a) Many of you know that I’m a hunter – not a very good one, but I hunt. In fact, Ben and I spent all day yesterday, hunting white-tailed deer. And if you’re a hunter or if you fish, you know that your pursuit of whatever it is you’re pursuing, can be very rewarding...
- b) And every once in a while, people will ask me after finishing a day of hunting, if it was FUN. My answer is usually, “Not really.” Rewarding, maybe. Enjoyable most of the time. But not really fun.
- c) And so, I got to thinking, “What is the end result of hunting? Or fishing?”
- d) If the end result of hunting is harvesting an animal that you were pursuing, then, I have to tell you...hunting is pretty stupid! Because of the 25-30 hours I’ve spent archery hunting in the woods this year, I have nothing to show for it. There have been times when I’ve been out fishing for an entire morning and not caught a thing. Larry is a really skilled flyfisherman...but I ASSUME that on at least one of those days, the stream has yielded ZERO fish.
- e) But then I began to truly consider what I thought was the end result of hunting...
- f) And I’ve concluded that the end result of deer hunting is the HOPE – the fervent BELIEF – that at any second, a deer will come walking within range and I will put all my practice to the test to make a clean shot and celebrate what God has provided.
- g) Hunting is lots of other things to me too, like peace in the woods, spending time with family, outsmarting the deer (like that ever happens), planning, practicing, scouting, dealing with frustration, using my outdoor skills...

- h) But ultimately, the end result of hunting is the belief that the next second could change your day dramatically...and that is the motivation!
- i) And I'm motivated to live to the fullest in THIS moment because of the promise of something awesome in the next moment...
- j) And doesn't that also just speak to the Christian life we live. We're motivated TODAY to be faithful and effective kingdom-builders for Jesus Christ (faithful followers) because of the hope – the promise – the belief – in God's tomorrow.
- k) And for Jesus, that next day came the day he went to the cross...the day it all changed.
- l) But you'll remember that Jesus wasn't alone on that hill...there were two men with him, also being crucified. And, as we'll find out, one of them had hope and one of them died a bitter cynic.
- m) And so my question this morning is, "What is the end result of faith?" What difference does it make TODAY, if we have some hope in the life to come, or hope in the One, Jesus, who came to offer that life to us on the cross?
- n) Let's open our Bibles to Luke chapter 23, starting in verse 32.
- o) Let's pray...

2) Scripture

a) Read verses 23:32-33:

- i) As we read the beginning of this narrative, it all seems so sterile, doesn't it? Like, yeah, Jesus was there standing around with these other two criminals and then they were lined up and crucified.
- ii) But let's not forget the fact that Jesus just went through a bogus trial, being beating to within a hairsbreadth of his life, forced to carry a heavy beam onto which he would be nailed, mocked and spit on! All to come to the end result of laying down on a wooden cross to be nailed through the hands and feet.
- iii) This was NOT even close to just three guys going being killed...it was torture and blood and extended pain for each of them.
- iv) And they came to Golgatha, the place called The Skull...

- v) And they were laid down, tied to the beam, and a soldier would place a nail in each wrist and through each one's feet, securing them to the wood.
- vi) And Luke is particular to mention that one criminal was on the right and one on the left. Why is that significant?
- vii) Mark 10:35-38 - James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, **one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.**" But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"
- viii) They didn't know what it was that they were asking. Being close to Jesus isn't all about having the glory and being in a position of power.
- ix) These two criminals probably knew very little about Jesus. But they were somehow, by God's divine providence, on THAT day, in THAT place, next to the Son of God. They were in the place where the disciples SAID they wanted to be when Jesus was walking around, but who were NO WHERE TO BE FOUND now that Jesus was in THAT position.
- x) And as they were being nailed to the cross...Jesus speaks...

b) Read verse 23:34

- i) John Wesley, in his notes on this verse wrote, "While they were actually nailing [Jesus] to the cross, he seems to feel the injury they did to their own souls, more than the wounds they gave him; and, as it were, to forget his own anguish out of concern for their own salvation"
- ii) Jesus, through his excruciating pain, FORGIVES... THEM... FOR... CAUSING...IT!
- iii) The greatest miracle of God is Jesus' ability, desire, and willingness to forgive sin...the sins of those murdering him...the sins of those who lied and forced him to the cross...the sins of those who have come before us...the sins of the criminals...your sins...and my sins. And Jesus has the ability, desire, and willingness to do that, even in spite of our ignorance and frailty.

- iv) As they nail Jesus to the cross...he offers them forgiveness. That doesn't mean they accepted it...they may not have even heard what he said.
- v) Sometimes, we offer forgiveness not knowing what the outcome will be for the person who we've forgiven. A spouse. A child. A friend. Someone we don't even know. Our humble offer of forgiveness when someone has hurt us is God's grace and mercy working in us and, we hope, in the person we are forgiving.
- vi) Jesus, in the throws of incredible pain, is motivated by the Holy Spirit living in Him to forgive the very people who are causing that pain! Don't miss that the next time you are embattled with someone...when you are broken and hurting. Forgiveness begins the process of healing and hope...
- vii) And not only was Jesus forgiving them for being physically abused at the cross, but he was mocked and denied...by those who were there.

c) Read verses 23:35-39

- i) This has lots of parallels to a contemporary sporting event, doesn't it?! These people were standing around WATCHING this happen! Had they become so used to it? Were they moved AT ALL by the sight of men being tortured and killed? Are we? How many times do the stories on the news go unnoticed?
- ii) The religious leaders...they scoffed (harrumph!). And they turned to the crowd and said, "Hey, we saw him save other people – he healed cripples (!) and even raised people from the dead, didn't he???" – he should save himself IF he is the Messiah of God."
- iii) And that's a big if...basically, they were denying that Jesus was who he said he was, even though they had seen the miracles and witnessed healings. Do we? Any doubts about who Jesus is? I think it's in our human nature to have doubts about something so amazing.
- iv) And the soldiers also mocked him...save yourself, Jesus! They offered him, in jest, some sour wine – something that was undrinkable! They mocked him with their attitude and pride. Do we do that?
- v) And in the most ironic and pointed criticism of Jesus, they placed a wooden sign over his head that read "This is the King of the Jews" *Iesus*

Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum, or if you've seen the abbreviation INRI over the cross.

- vi) And, according to Luke, even one of the criminals, who was being crucified IN THE SAME WAY AS JESUS, was mocking him. Sacracstically, mimicking the soldiers and the religious leaders...save yourself, Jesus! LOL Right?
- vii) Here's the bottom line...Jesus came into this broken world in humble circumstances, lived a sinless life, is the central figure in all of world history, is the central figure in the lives of billions of Christians, had followers too many to count while he was alive, and many times more after he died, and yet on THAT DAY...in THAT PLACE called The Skull, Jesus died an ironic and shameful death at the hands of those whom he forgave for their brutal and sinful actions.
- viii) And the sign over his head, even though they thought it was mockery and no one truly understood it, even the criminal by his side,...that sign was 100% true! He IS the King! He is Lord!
- ix) Sometimes, I think we mock Jesus with our attitudes and our actions. I think we forget what Jesus has done for us. We forget who he really is. We become comfortable and willing to settle into a Christian routine that includes learning ABOUT Jesus and worshipping Him. But we forget how almighty and holy he is. We forget that he said, in order to follow him, we need to take up our cross...we need to die to ourselves and live for him. Where are WE in this story...
- x) But the story isn't done...
- xi) Before Jesus died, Luke tells us of one last act...one last exclamation point...the end of faith.

d) Read verses 23:40-42

- i) The other guy next to Jesus realized that the end result of his life was humiliating death in public on a cross...just like Jesus!
- ii) And so, he rebukes the first criminal. Like, "What are you DOING?!?" "We deserve this punishment. He doesn't!" "We're up here because we broke some serious laws – committed some heinous crime – knowing full well what the punishment would be if we got caught!" "This guy between us didn't DO anything wrong!"

- iii) And in this moment of illumination, this criminal sees the downright silliness of the first criminal's attitude toward Jesus.
- iv) He finally understood the end result of his sin...and it wasn't good.
- v) And then as if all the players in this drama fade away and there are only two people left, the criminal turns to Jesus and finds the only words he can find...
- vi) Out of some sense of panic maybe or some humble attempt to do something about his circumstance, he simply says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Not, "Jesus save me." Not, "I should have been a better person." Not, "Hey, I lived a good life."
- vii) But, "Jesus, my end has come...all I have left is to trust in what you said."
- viii) And that's all Jesus needed to hear...
- ix) It's all he wanted to hear, in order to unleash the awesome gift of full forgiveness, grace, and mercy on this repentant, humble sinner...

e) Read verses 23:43

- i) Here's the truth, says Jesus, because you have come to me in faith, YOUR end result, although it will appear to be that humiliating death on a public cross, will not be any less than eternal life with me.
- ii) The end result of this criminal's deeds was still physical death...there was no avoiding that. But because of Jesus, the story doesn't end there...eternal life was his to give. To the criminal. To the crowd. To you. To me.
- iii) Jesus started his earthly ministry, as we read in Luke 4:18, by proclaiming, "good news to the poor," and, "release to the captives." He ends it, here, by extending to this wretch, assurance of salvation.

3) Application

- a) I can't help but wonder, though, how much better the second criminal's life would have been had he lived with the assurance of that eternal salvation from much earlier in life? What would his life have looked like, living each day with faith in Jesus and assurance of salvation?

- b) For those who have decided that what Jesus said was true...who have given their lives to follow Christ...who trust in the grace that Jesus offers...who have been born again into new life in Christ, faith results in an alternate reality in THIS world and the world to come.
- c) And like all the things that go into our pursuit of game like white-tailed deer, I spent some time listing some of the things that result right now from our faith in Jesus.
- d) We go to church. We worship. We learn about our faith. We serve on ministry teams. We tithe and give resources to the ministry of the church. We forgive. We love. We learn what it means to allow the Holy Spirit to guide us. We go on mission trips. We serve others. We have grateful hearts. We believe in bodily resurrection. So many more...
- e) But ultimately, the end result of our faith is the same as the end result of Jesus' faith (however great). And it's the same as the end result of the second criminal's faith (however puny)...knowing the assurance of salvation that is the gift of God through Jesus Christ.
- f) Whatever we do in this life that causes God to rejoice, however great it may be, pales in comparison to the very moment that we understand that God loves us and wants to give us eternal life. John Wesley had his heart warmed in worship. Some of us have had lightning bolt experiences...life altering times. Others have come to faith over many years of growth. And as we respond to those experiences, we put to death the sin nature in us and turn our hearts and minds to Jesus...when we take up our crosses and follow him.
- g) That ASSURANCE of salvation is the hope we have...it's the motivation to live today and to hope for tomorrow.
- h) When I sit in the woods and have hope that a deer is going to walk by, my eyes remain peeled, my senses heightened, and I'm ready.
- i) In the Christian walk, believing that this life is not the end of us...that Jesus offers eternal life...is the key for us to engage in our mission here at this church *to seek to love God, to introduce others to Jesus, and to help those relationships grow.*
- j) We keep our eyes peeled, senses heightened, and we're ready to be the followers of Jesus in THIS life, TODAY, as we hope for the life to come.

4) Conclusion

- a) This morning, after I pray, we will be singing a simple song called, *Jesus, Remember Me*. This song comes out of the Taize tradition, and is a very simple, repetitive chorus. During that song, I invite you to come forward and offer to God your thanks and praise...your sin...your life.
- b) We will repeat this song as long as there are people praying up front. Come to cross...come to Jesus today. From your heart, pray the simple prayer, Jesus, remember me... This space will be wide open for you to come...
- c) You know, next week is the beginning of Advent, when we prepare to relive the story of the coming of Jesus, The Perfect Gift.
- d) It's interesting how the story of Jesus begins where it ends (Jesus' humanity with us) and ends back where it begins (at his eternal divinity).
- e) And for us, the end result of faith is the assurance that Jesus' life is fused with ours. Today, Jesus says, is the first day of your eternity with me.
- f) Let's pray...