

**A Historically Grounded Narrative Series**

## **Mercy at the Edge of Death**

*A condemned man's final words, and the promise that  
outlasted a lifetime of guilt*

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A biblically faithful retelling rooted in Scripture, historical context, and careful theological clarity.

### *About this Account*

This narrative is drawn directly from the biblical record and presented using widely recognized translations such as the ESV, NIV, NASB, and KJV. Cultural, geographical, and historical insights are included to deepen understanding while remaining faithful to the text.



## **Setup — Condemned Together, Yet Not the Same (Luke 23:32–33; cf. Mark 15:27–28)**

The scene opens outside Jerusalem, where Roman authority is carried out in its most public and final form. At a place called Golgotha, “the Skull”, three men are led to execution (Luke 23:33). Among them is Jesus. On either side of him are two others identified simply as criminals.

The method is deliberate.

Crucifixion is not only punishment, it is exposure. It is designed to be seen, to reinforce order through fear. Those condemned are placed along visible routes or elevated ground so that passersby can witness the consequence of defiance. The bodies are lifted, fixed to wood, and left to endure a prolonged death. This is not a private moment. It is a public declaration.

The two men crucified beside Jesus are not described in detail. Their names are not given. Their crimes are not listed beyond the designation “criminals” (Luke 23:32). What is clear is their shared outcome. They have been judged, sentenced, and placed under the same form of execution. Whatever their past actions, they have led them here.

Their position beside Jesus carries its own meaning.

The Gospels note that he is crucified “with the transgressors” (cf. Mark 15:28; Isaiah 53:12). The placement is intentional from a Roman perspective, grouping the condemned, but within the broader narrative, it reflects something deeper: Jesus is counted among those judged guilty, though the accounts consistently present him as innocent (Luke 23:41).

Above him is an inscription: “*This is the King of the Jews*” (Luke 23:38).

From the perspective of the authorities, it is a charge and a form of irony. From the perspective of the narrative, it is a statement that will be interpreted differently by those who watch, and by those who hang beside him.

The setting is now fully established:

Three men under the same sentence.

One publicly declared as king, yet crucified.

Two others bearing the consequence of their own actions.

Nothing in the scene suggests reversal.

There is no expectation of rescue.

No pathway away from the cross.

No time for long reflection or changed circumstances.

Only the final hours remain.

And yet, within that shared sentence, a distinction is about to emerge, not in circumstance, but in response.

### **Conflict — Mockery in the Midst of Judgment (Luke 23:35–39)**

The suffering is not endured in silence. Around the crosses, voices rise, not in compassion, but in challenge. Rulers stand nearby, watching, and they speak openly: “*He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!*” (Luke 23:35). Roman soldiers join the pattern,

offering sour wine and repeating the same demand: “*If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!*” (Luke 23:36–37).

The pressure is consistent.

Prove it.

Escape it.

Demonstrate power in the only way they recognize, by avoiding suffering.

The inscription above Jesus, “*This is the King of the Jews*” (Luke 23:38), hangs as both accusation and misunderstanding. To those watching, kingship and crucifixion cannot belong together. Authority should prevent this moment, not be defined by it.

The conflict intensifies when it moves closer, onto the cross itself.

One of the criminals joins the voices below: “*Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!*” (Luke 23:39). His words echo the crowd, but with added urgency. He is not only mocking, he is desperate. If Jesus has power, it must be used now. There is no interest in explanation, only in immediate relief.

The tension becomes internal, not just external.

Both men share the same fate.

Both endure the same pain.

Both are equally near to death.

Yet their responses diverge.

One aligns with the crowd, demanding deliverance without acknowledgment.

The other remains silent, for the moment, but will soon respond differently.

This is the heart of the conflict:

The same circumstance does not produce the same conclusion.

*(Theological insight: Many interpreters note that this moment reveals a key distinction, proximity to Jesus does not guarantee transformation. Both criminals are equally close physically, yet only one moves toward recognition and trust.)*

The scene holds together several layers:

Public rejection from below.

A challenge to identity from those in power.

And now, a divided response from those sharing the same cross.

Nothing changes in their condition.

The crosses remain.

The sentence stands.

The end is approaching.

But within that unchanging reality, a choice is forming, one that will define not the length of their lives, but the direction of their final moments.

**Turning Point — A Voice of Repentance, A Glimpse of a Kingdom (Luke 23:40–42)**

The shift comes from where it is least expected, not from the crowd, not from the soldiers, but from one of the condemned.

The second criminal speaks.

He first turns toward the man beside him, not toward Jesus, and rebukes him: *“Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?”* (Luke 23:40). The words introduce something absent from the surrounding voices, reverence. Where others mock or demand, he acknowledges accountability.

Then he speaks of himself.

*“We indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds”* (Luke 23:41).

There is no defense.

No attempt to minimize what has brought him here.  
No shifting of blame.

He names his guilt plainly.

This is the first clear distinction between the two men. Both suffer, but only one interprets his suffering as just. The cross becomes, for him, not merely punishment, but acknowledgment.

Then he speaks of Jesus.

*“But this man has done nothing wrong.”* (Luke 23:41)

In a setting defined by accusation, he declares innocence. Surrounded by voices that question Jesus’ identity, he affirms his righteousness. The contrast is stark:

- The crowd sees a failed claimant.
- The rulers see a threat removed.
- This man sees one who does not belong on the cross.

Finally, he turns directly to Jesus.

*“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*  
(Luke 23:42)

The request is brief, but it carries depth. He does not ask to be taken down. He does not ask for relief from pain. He asks to be remembered. More than that, he speaks of a kingdom, implying that what is happening now is not the end of Jesus’ authority.

This is the turning point.

A man at the edge of death recognizes what others do not:

- That Jesus’ suffering does not cancel his kingship.
- That death does not end his reign.
- That mercy may still be possible.

*(Theological insight: Many interpreters identify this moment as a clear expression of repentance and faith, acknowledgment of sin, recognition of Jesus’ innocence, and trust in his future authority, all compressed into a final appeal.)*

Nothing in the physical situation changes.

The crosses remain.

The pain continues.

Death is still imminent.

But the direction of the moment shifts completely.

One man continues in rejection.

The other turns toward recognition and trust.

And with that turn, the final words spoken to him will carry a promise that outlasts the cross itself.

### **Resolution — A Promise Spoken Before the End (Luke 23:43)**

The answer comes without delay, and without condition.

Jesus responds directly to the man's request: "*Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.*" (Luke 23:43)

The language is precise.

"Truly", a word of certainty.

"Today", a statement of immediacy.

"With me", a promise of presence, not merely place.

There is no requirement added.

No further question asked.

No reference to what the man has done or failed to do beyond what has already been acknowledged.

The request had been simple: "*Remember me.*"

The response goes beyond it: **You will be with me.**

The setting has not changed.

The cross remains.  
The sentence continues.  
The physical outcome is the same for all three men.

But the meaning of that outcome is no longer the same.

The man who admitted his guilt now receives assurance.  
The one who asked to be remembered is promised belonging.

*(Theological insight: Many Christian traditions understand this moment as a clear expression of grace, salvation given not through accumulated works, but through trust placed in Jesus, even at the final moment.)*

The resolution is not visible to those watching.

The crowd sees three men dying.

The soldiers see an execution completed.

But within that scene, a promise has been spoken that redefines one man's end.

He does not come down from the cross.

He does not escape the consequence of his actions.

But he does not face death alone.

The final distinction is complete:

- One man dies in rejection.
- One man dies with a promise.

### **Reflection — When the End Is Near, But Not Final**

The man had no time to rebuild his life.

No time to restore what was broken.

No time to change his past.

But he had time to turn.

And that was enough.

The story does not suggest that time is irrelevant. It reveals that even the smallest remaining moment still holds weight.

**Question for Reflection:**

When facing the weight of what cannot be undone, is hope found in what remains of time, or in the direction the heart turns, even in its final moments?

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