

## Passion week, Day 1: He walks with me to the Gates

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Scripture Reading: Luke 23:39-43

*<sup>39</sup> One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? 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, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."*

Crucifixion was reserved as one of the most humiliating and dishonorable deaths imaginable in the ancient world. It was reserved for the worst offenders—slaves, pirates, rebels, and enemies of the state. To be crucified meant that society had judged you as among the lowest and most despised. And yet here is Jesus, the innocent Son of God, placed at the same level as those considered the worst of the community. The most humbling—and perhaps most unsettling part of this passage is not simply that Jesus was insulted by one of the criminals on a cross next to him. It is that He hung on the cross among criminals.

But in this dark moment, something remarkable happens. One of the criminals hanging beside Jesus begins to see clearly. While the other continues to mock, this man recognizes the truth. He acknowledges his guilt and does not excuse his wrongdoing: *"We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve."* In humility and repentance, he turns to Jesus and pleads for mercy: *"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*

By every measure of earthly judgment, this man deserved the cross. Yet Jesus does not respond with condemnation. Instead, He offers a promise filled with astonishing grace: *"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."*

In that moment, Jesus dies alongside a sinner and promises to bring him into eternal life. It is as if Jesus Himself will escort this broken man through the gates of heaven. When Jesus looks at us, He does not look with eyes eager to condemn. He does not recount every failure or rehearse every sin. Instead, He sees with compassion, with mercy, and with grace.

The repentant criminal had nothing to offer—no good works, no time left to make amends, yet Jesus received him and kept him close.

The same grace remains for us today. No matter where we have been, and no matter how deeply we have failed, no matter if we feel we have nothing to offer, Jesus does not withdraw His promise of salvation. He remains faithful. While we may be prone to abandon Him, He never abandons those who turn to Him in repentance.

So today, do not live in fear that Jesus will cast you away when you fail. Instead, when you stumble, return to Him. Confess, repent, and come back to the Lord. He will receive you just as

He received the criminal on the cross. Take one more step forward, because we don't know how the Holy Spirit can work in us, how He will continue to form us. Remember, He is with us until we get to the gates, until we go home to Him. May you rest today in the assurance of His grace—and in the depth of His unfailing love.