

**John 19:17-18**

Good Friday

**Lessons for the Day: Isaiah 52:13–53:12; Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 19:17-30**

**Three Crosses**

April 18, 2025

*“and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them.”*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

If there is one thing that is in our mind as we gather in worship today, it is the cross. The message of the cross resonates through our worship today. The bare chancel and the sombre mood of our worship direct us again to the cross of the Saviour; the One who suffered so much for you, for me and for all the people of all time in all the world. We do come and survey the wondrous cross. We come with penitent hearts to see the love of the Saviour, who gave Himself on that cross for us and for our salvation.

But there were three crosses on Golgotha that day. Those three crosses are represented on the front lawn of the church. Three crosses—three different men. Three different realities in their deaths. Three different lessons for us today.

All four Gospels tell us about the three crosses. Matthew and Mark refer to the other men crucified that day as two robbers; Luke calls them criminals. It is likely that they were more than just robbers. John refers to Barabbas as a robber, but Luke tells us that Barabbas was *“a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder.”* (Luke 23:19, ESV) That was probably the case with the two criminals. They were robbers or thieves, but also violent men. They were far from innocent victims of crucifixion.

It was not uncommon for multiple crucifixions to take place at the same time and yet we know that it was not by accident that those three crosses were on that hill called Golgotha. As Isaiah spoke of this day, 700 years before the actual events, he had prophesied: *“Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.”* (Isaiah 53:12, ESV) Before Jesus and the disciples went to the Garden of Gethsemane, the Saviour had told His disciples: *“For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors.’ For what is written about me has its fulfillment.”* (Luke 22:37, ESV) Jesus was never ashamed to be known as the “friend of sinners”. When He began His public ministry, He was baptized by a reluctant John the Baptist, who at first refused to baptize Him, until Jesus said: *“Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented.* (Matthew 3:15, ESV) As the beautiful Epiphany hymn for the Baptism of Jesus reminds us: *Jesus, once with sinners numbered, Full obedience was Your path; You, by death, have consecrated Water in this saving bath: Dying to the sin of Adam, Rising to a life of grace; We are counted with the righteous, Over us the cross You trace.* (LSB 404, st. 4) )

On that Good Friday the Sinless Son of God was once again numbered among the transgressors. Those three crosses were a public spectacle. We know that as Jesus was crucified that day the crowds mocked Him, crying out: *“You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”* (Matthew 27:40, ESV) The chief priests and the religious leaders joined in those taunts: *“He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.”* (Matthew 27:42, ESV) Even those two criminals joined in that mocking. Three crosses. Two men, bitter and angry. One who endures the shame in silence.

Three crosses. Three different men. Three different ways of facing the truth. Luke tells us: *“One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!’”* (Luke 23:39, ESV) Here is a man who doesn’t acknowledge the ugliness of his sins. He is looking for excuses. He wants a way out. He doesn’t want to face the consequences of what he has done. He refuses to accept that this is right and just. How often are we like that? We ignore our sinfulness. We want God to look past our sin and to accept us just as we are. People don’t want to hear that they are sinners. They definitely don’t want to acknowledge that the sins of our lives are worthy of the suffering that we see on the cross. Just get us out of this Jesus. After all, isn’t that the loving thing to do?

This cross speaks of all who refuse to acknowledge their sin, but it also speaks of those who make a mockery of God’s salvation. Sin cannot be ignored. It cannot simply be brushed aside. That thief may not like it, but he is bound to the cross by

the nails that hold him in place. If only he could have seen that there was the One who was also held to the cross; not by the nails, for He could have saved Himself, but out of love for this man, to truly pay the price for his sins and the sins of the world.

That is what we see in the second cross. As the time passes on that Good Friday, this man starts to see something different. He has heard Jesus pray for those who mocked Him, who abused Him, who crucified Him. He cannot believe that anyone would be able to say: ***“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*** (Luke 23:34, ESV) How blessed this man is that the Holy Spirit is at work, even in this dark hour! As his friend ridicules the Lord of Life, this man rebukes him and says: ***“Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”*** (Luke 23:40–41, ESV) It is never easy to admit our sinfulness. It is not easy to acknowledge that we deserve nothing from God. Yet we come before the Lord with those words we know we need to say again and again: we confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean. We have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved You with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves. We justly deserve Your present and eternal punishment.

When we, like this robber, this criminal realize how lost and hopeless we are, we look to the only One who can deliver us. This man looked to the One on that third cross, praying: ***“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*** (Luke 23:42, ESV) How blessed this man was to hear the promise of the Lord: ***“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”*** (Luke 23:43, ESV)

When Simeon held the infant Jesus in his arms and knew that God’s salvation was being fulfilled he told Mary: ***“Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed . . . so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”*** (Luke 2:34–35, ESV) Three crosses—and one of them reveals the thoughts of all hearts. Three crosses, but only one brings life and salvation. Jesus assures us: ***“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”*** (John 3:16–21, ESV)

Three crosses. Three different men. Three different truths. The cross of the unrepentant robber speaks of the judgement we deserve for our sins. Sadly, it leaves us to that judgement. The cross of the repentant robber speaks of the law of God doing its work, breaking our pride and revealing our sinfulness that deserves nothing but punishment. That law makes us say with Paul: ***“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”*** (Romans 7:24, ESV)

Thankfully, the broken and contrite heart finds peace through the third cross—the cross of Jesus Christ. The sinless Lord of Glory came to take upon Himself—to take into Himself—the sins of the whole world. He came to bear the punishment we deserve for our sins. He will feel the burden and shame and the separation that sin brings and cry out: ***“Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?”*** that is, ***“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*** (Matthew 27:46, ESV) Yet He will also cry out in victory: ***“It is finished,”*** and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” (John 19:30, ESV) He has done what needed to be done for us, for our forgiveness for our life.

Three crosses, fulfilling the plan of God. Three crosses with three different individuals. Ultimately only one of those crosses matters, and that is the cross of our Lord and Saviour. He was numbered with the transgressors. He suffered and died for you. But the cross isn’t the final word. The Lord who died for us has also defeated death and the grave for us. He rose again, as He promised. The cross says, ***“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”*** But there is that empty tomb that enables us to proclaim: ***Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”*** (Romans 7:24–25, ESV) Amen.