

Names of Wondrous Love—THE WAY Text: Luke 23:39-43

How do you plan your trips? How do you decide what highways to travel, what roads to take? Are you old school, like my dad? Get out the atlas or gazetteer and look at the route before you go? Or do you get on the Internet, bring up Mapquest or GoogleMaps, and print out your route? Or maybe you've given in to the technological ease of letting your phone or GPS tell you where to go, not even looking at a map. There's something to be said for knowing the route. If we rely on our phone and lose cell service in the mountains, we're lost. If we rely on our gps with an old map system, we might find ourselves driving through fields and forests, given its directions.

How about the way to heaven? How are we going to get to that most important destination? Hopefully each of us can answer, "**There is only one way.**" **Jesus spoke some very important words, "I am the way. . . . No one comes to the Father except through me"** (Jn 14:6). Today, 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.

I. The two men crucified on either side of the Savior belonged there. 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, or something else, that criminal recognized that his punishment fit his crimes. He and his partner were sinners who in the eyes of God and of human law had lost their way.

But not 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 so afflicted him, the thief had reached a conclusion. This Jesus was **not** a sinner who had lost his way.

Yet 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**" (Isa 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?**" (Mt 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 deed of every sinner.

For a moment today, 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 into the attic or put him on ice; each time we reject his will or trade him for this world; each time we gossip about our neighbor or get greedy ideas about his money, fame, or spouse; each time we hate and hurt and hit back at our fellowman; 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.

II. That criminal not only saw that Jesus was innocent. With eyes of faith, he also saw that Jesus was his only way to heaven. Don't ask 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? Had Christ's words and actions on the way to and out on Calvary preached 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.”** Three, four more hours that thief would draw his ragged breath in pain on that cross, but that very day—not years down the road after some painful stay in a fictitious purgatory—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. Even 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 that same day hear the Savior's voice and share his 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, 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 they mean. Jesus is not just some marker pointing us in the right direction like the ones out on our highways. He is the road itself. And what a highway he is. Straight as an arrow. Smoother than freshly cured concrete. Never a detour and not one orange barrel. No toll booths to clog up the traffic flow and collect our cash. He is the way, the only way to the Father's house above. With his death and resurrection as payment for all sin, he made himself the *freeway* to heaven, one that asks nothing from us because it took everything from him.

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 journey to his heaven. Amen.

2 Thessalonians 3:16 Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. Amen.