

# The Passion of Lent: The Two Thieves

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

## Prayer of Illumination

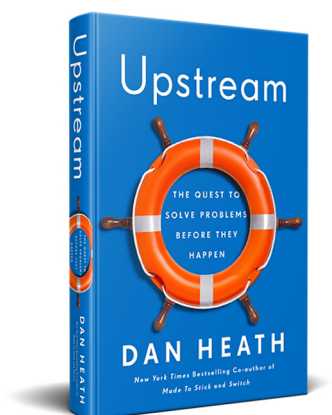
Lord God,  
help us turn our hearts to you  
and hear what you will speak,  
for you speak peace to your people  
through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## Scripture: Luke 23:39-43 (NRSV)

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

## SERMON – The Two Thieves



*"Upstream: The Quest to Solve Problems Before They Start"*  
<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/upstream-dan-heath/1133754709>

In Dan Heath's excellent new book *"Upstream: The Quest to Solve Problems Before They Start,"* he shares a true story about the power of memory and remembering.



Elena Grace with her Daddy Doll  
Tricia Dyle, Daddy Dolls Inc.  
<https://daddydolls.com>

It was 2005 and Tricia Dyal's husband Justin, a special ops Marine, was deployed to Iraq. Tricia and Justin had two girls—Elena Grace who was three and Elissa Faith was just eight months old at the time. Justin wasn't so much afraid of dying as his daughters forgetting who he was while he was deployed. A few weeks after his departure, both his daughters came down with a virus—not coronavirus, but a rotavirus and they had to be hospitalized. The three-year old Elena Grace was exhausted from her illness and missed her daddy terribly. Her mom gave her a photo of her dad, but it was falling apart because she held it wherever she went. Tricia came up with an idea to comfort her daughter. She called her great-aunt Mary, who was really good at crafting. "Could you make a doll with Justin's picture on it?" Mary found a way to imprint Justin's photo onto some fabric and she sewed it into a doll. When little Elena was given her Daddy Doll, it never left her hospital bedside.

When Elena Grace came home her Daddy Doll went with her wherever she went: in the shopping cart at the store, on the playground with her at the park. Her Daddy Doll attended countless tea parties with her. At night, her Daddy Doll prayed with her. Aunt Mary made a second Daddy Doll for little Elissa Faith, too.

After nine months—it came time for Justin to return home. He was nervous about being reunited with his daughters again. He'd heard stories from other Marines that their children were scared of them and avoided them for several weeks upon return.

Justin arrived home at night, and he went up to Elissa Faith's room, just to look at her as she slept. She woke up and stared at her dad who was still wearing his uniform. She looked at her doll and then threw it down. Elissa Faith extended her arms and said, "Daddy!!!" She remembered him! And he broke down and cried—for the first time in his adult life.

A new business would eventually be formed by the family. Daddy and Mommy Dolls, or Hug a Hero. They're now a staple for many military families around the country.



*"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom"*  
by Hanna Varghese <http://hanna-artwork.com>

Jesus remembered. And he doesn't forget us either. Throughout the passion, Jesus had been alone undergoing extreme social distancing. And this isolation wasn't for his health or wellbeing. His disciples deserted, denied, betrayed, and fled from him. Pilate declared him innocent, yet still consigned Christ to the worst form of death sentence: crucifixion.

But on the cross, Christ was no longer alone. There were now two by his side. One to his right and another to his left. These were not disciples nor saints, but two criminals hanging on their own crosses.

Once again Jesus finds himself in bad company. Once again sinners find themselves in good company with Jesus. All three experiencing together the agony, the shame, and impending death in solidarity and close proximity.

One criminal hurled insults at Jesus—in fact the Greek word used is *blasphemeo*. "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and save us." This was also the taunt of the religious leaders. They thought the sign of God's favor was that Jesus would be delivered **from** death. But they had no idea Jesus would be delivered by God **through** death.



*"Three Crosses" by Corey Couturier*  
<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/63402307224435269>

Of the four gospels, Luke alone tells us of the good criminal who **REBUKED** the sarcasm of his fellow criminal. Extra-biblical church tradition says his name was Dismas. There are several scenes like this in Luke, where in the midst of a very ugly situation, an unlikely person enters to bring hope. For Luke, this person was often one those left out by society: women, gentiles, the marginalized, and underdogs. You see, it's the "least of these" in Luke who have the deepest insight into the character of Jesus. The criminal Dismas joins Luke's chorus of outsiders who powerfully witness to Christ.

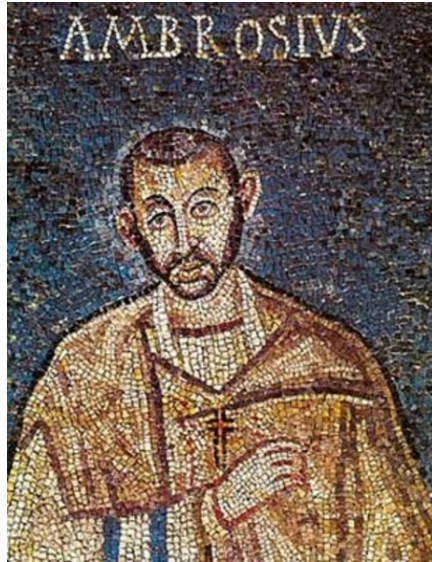
"Don't you fear God since you're under the same death sentence? We're getting what we deserve for our deeds. But this man—he's innocent—he's done nothing wrong." (Luke 23:39-40)

Both Pilate and Herod had already said the same thing: The man is innocent. Dismas then calls out to Jesus by name: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

He knows he's guilty. In Jewish thought, if a person admitted their guilt it was a sign of their remorse and repentance. It was a way of reaching out and seeking reconciliation. Don't forget me, Jesus. I don't deserve to be remembered. I'm at fault. But I trust that you're a king. So when you sit upon your throne, don't forget me!

The criminal made his confession: A bold confession of faith that Jesus is King. The convicted Dismas didn't look to himself for deliverance. He instead looked to the innocent Jesus. The criminal Dismas is the first in the gospels to realize that Jesus' death doesn't negate his messiahship. That God's plan comes to fruition **THROUGH** the crucifixion—not in spite of it.

Jesus didn't dismiss Dismas. "TRULY I tell you," says Jesus, "TODAY you will be with me in Paradise."



*"Saint Ambrose" (337-397)*  
Antique mosaic, Basilica di Sant' Ambrogio, Milan  
<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/63402307224435269>

I love how Bishop Ambrose put it centuries ago:

"More abundant is the favor shown than the request made... For life is to be with Christ, because where Christ is, is the kingdom."

Jesus did MORE than the criminal asked, *before* he even died and rose again. Jesus has the power in life and in death. In Christ, we have power in life and death.

The word "paradise" is an interesting word. Paradise means garden. The word paradise was used originally for the Garden of Eden. The prophet Isaiah used the word paradise to describe a future bliss of God's people. Jesus understands paradise as the state of bliss the thief will experience directly after death.

Hear the good news, Immanuel:

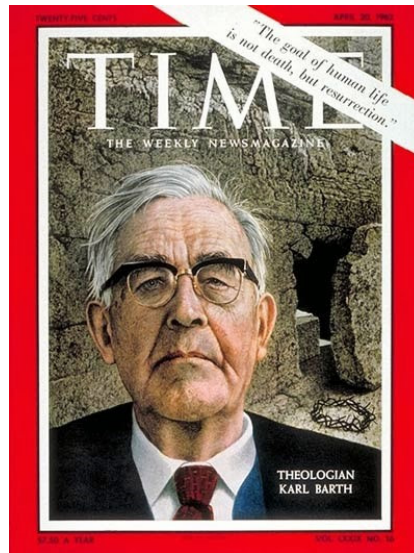
Jesus the Messiah has the kingly right and the desire to open wide the doors of paradise to those who cry out to him.

Jesus came to save, and he wants to save and he's still saving.

The Apostle's Creed says that Jesus will "come to judge the quick and the dead." Here Jesus offers his judgment upon the criminal: You are acquitted. You will be in relationship with me for eternity. You are forgiven and not forgotten.



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*"Theologian Karl Barth"*

Time Magazine Cover © Time Inc. New York 1962

<http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19620420,00.html>

One of theologian Karl Barth's most famous sermons was on the two thieves. He preached the sermon on Good Friday to prisoners in a Swiss prison. I'd like to close with his moving words:

*"Consider the fact: Jesus died precisely for these two criminals who were crucified on his right and on his left and went to their death with him. He did not die for the sake of a good world, he died for the sake of an evil world, not for the pious, but for the godless, not for the just, but for the unjust, for the deliverance, the victory and the joy of all, that they might have life. We are such people, all of us—you in this house which is called a prison, with all the burden that brought you here and with your particular experiences in this place—those others of us outside who have different experiences and yet are, believe me, in the same predicament. In reality we all are these people, these crucified criminals. And only one thing matters now. Are we ready to be told what we are?"*

"Jesus, remember us, when you come into your kingdom."

**Amen.**

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