



Good morning. My name is Neal Benson and I'm our Foster City Campus Pastor. Even though I'm a pastor now I wasn't always a Christ-follower. In fact, for many years I lived a life contrary to the teachings of Christ which ended up getting me in a lot of trouble. But once God grabbed my heart it was a complete change. It was probably 6 months to a year after I surrendered to Christ that I began to realize the need to share with others about my response to follow Jesus. One evening we were BBQ'ing at our apartment in San Diego when an old friend of mine and I began talking about this change. She questioned my decision to follow Christ. I didn't have to explain much to her; she had been a close witness to the wreck my life was before I met Jesus. The conversation actually allowed me to ask the question and see if she would like to be a Christ-follower.

When I asked it was like I asked her to shave her head and tattoo Motley Crew on it! She was fired up. She began to tell me how she wanted to live her life and live it her way. I encouraged her to make a decision to follow Christ and reminded her of the change He had made in me. The conversation was going nowhere though and I realized it when she asked me this question I will never forget: "Neal, how come I can't just live my life the way I want to and when I'm dying in a hospital bed I can just accept Jesus and go to heaven?"

Have you ever been shocked by someone's response to Jesus? I was shocked by my friend's response to Jesus. Have you noticed how people have all different kinds of responses to Jesus? Think about this. Some people respond enthusiastically and want to follow Jesus immediately. Some are ambivalent and unwilling to respond, while others are antagonistic when you bring up the name Jesus.

This morning we're going to see many different people and many different responses to Jesus Christ. Some people are going to respond positively to Christ while others taunt him. At the end of the Gospel of Luke there's an event which the whole Gospel points to—the death of Jesus. His death comes as no surprise to us. On several occasions Jesus predicted his death in detail. Jesus said things like: "The Son of Man must die" and "I'm going to Jerusalem where I will be betrayed and whipped." As time progressed all these things happened: He was betrayed by Judas, condemned by the Jewish Sanhedrin, handed over to Pilate, and the Romans mocked Him and spit on Him and beat Him.

Now, in Luke 23, Jesus begins his march to the cross where they'll crucify Him. As Luke describes this scene, there's one thing he wants us to know: Our response to Jesus' death determines His response to us. Luke describes the different response people had to Jesus in His last hours. We're not going to focus on the graphic nature of the cross or the how excruciating Jesus' suffering was. We're going to focus on how people respond to Jesus. We will also see time and time again Luke remind us that Jesus was an innocent man.

### **Simon's Response**

As they led Jesus out of the city, he was placed in the center of four Roman soldiers. The patibulum, the cross beam of the cross, weighing as much as 100 pounds, was dropped on his torn shoulders. Plutarch said: "Every criminal who goes to execution must carry his own cross on his back." It was a long walk to where Jesus would be crucified; the Romans always led the condemned through the city by the longest route to induce fear in the people and as a deterrent to crime.

Jesus started out carrying the cross beam, but he was so weakened by the beatings that they grabbed a visitor to the city named Simon. I imagine as Simon neared the city of Jerusalem he heard the roaring of the crowd. He was not prepared for what he was about to experience or who he would encounter.

**As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus (Luke 23:26).**

Simon was from North Africa, from Cyrene, today called Tripoli. He was probably a Jew who'd made the trip of a lifetime to Jerusalem for the Passover. I imagine him coming closer for a better view of what was happening, like a kid squeezing to the front of the crowd to see the parade. But then an awful thing happened. One of the condemned crumbled under the weight of the cross beam right at Simon's feet. Roman law gave soldiers the right of conscription, that is, they could draft anyone into service on the spot. They grabbed Simon and put him to work carrying the cross beam. How humiliating; how embarrassing.

Simon's trip was ruined. He knelt down to grab the crossbeam; he had no other choice. As he knelt in the dirt I imagine Jesus gently raising His head and looking Simon deep in the eyes. As tears fell from the eyes of Christ Simon knew he had to help

Him. Simon's response was to help Jesus. Simon wasn't the only person there. Luke tells us of a large crowd who followed.

**A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him (v. 27).**

If Simon's response was to help, then the crowd's response was to mourn in sympathy for Jesus. They followed Jesus, in mourning, to the location of His execution.

### **The Ruler's and Soldier's Response**

Simon laid the cross beam on the ground. These soldiers knew the routine. They threw Jesus down, spread his arms, and drove a spike through each wrist.

**When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left (v. 33).**

They raised the cross beam, and with Jesus' legs dangling, they fastened it to the standing post. They nailed His feet to the post with a single spike. Jesus began struggling upward for breath, and then collapsing downward in exhaustion. While this occurred we read the opposite of what we expect.

**Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots (v. 34).**

Jesus prays. Even though the response to Christ was to kill Him, He chose to pray for them. Luke is intent on making it clear that Christ was innocent and helps clarify His innocence.

While Jesus hung on that despicable cross the rulers took the opportunity to share their response to Christ. Listen to what they said to Him:

**"He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One" (v. 35).**

Their response was to taunt Jesus and hurl insults at Him. They have, what appears to be, a large amount of hatred built up. How could they hate someone so much? They are contemptuously hurling insults at Christ. This is the first of three taunts Jesus will receive while He hangs on the cross for six hours.

Unfortunately, the soldiers had a similar response to Christ. It was just another day's work for the soldiers. They had just punched in and already it was time to crucify someone. How many more of these would they have today? I've wondered if the sign above His head provoked their behavior? Luke tells us earlier that they actually rolled dice to see who would get His garments. Do you think they knew these were the very garments who healed the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years? Do you think they have any idea these garments had been turned into the whitest white on the mount of transfiguration?

They are soldiers, their response will be different right? Well, if they knew anything Christ did it didn't change their behavior.

The job might have just wore on them or group evil took hold as they mocked Jesus saying:

**"If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself!" (v. 37).**

The soldier's response was similar to the rulers; they both taunted and mocked Jesus. They hurled insults at Him as He hung there. Their insults were all Christological statements though! Christology is the part of Christian theology relating to the study and nature of Christ. Statements like "God's Messiah" and "Chosen One" all point to Jesus's reason for coming to earth. Unfortunately the rulers and soldiers didn't use these statements in the positive sense. It is clear they are against Jesus. Keep in the back of your mind, on these, that Jesus provides no response to their insults and taunting.

### **The Criminal's Response**

Simon helped Him, the crowd pitied Him, the rulers taunted Him, and the soldiers mocked Him. Could it get any worse for Jesus? What Luke introduces here is unique to his Gospel. Jesus is hung next to two men who both have a response to give. The prophet Isaiah had predicted 700 years earlier the Messiah would be numbered among transgressors like these two robbers (Isaiah 53:12). The first criminal fell into the same pattern of the rulers and soldiers.

**One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" (v. 39).**

This is the third, and final, taunt Jesus will receive on the cross. You would think his response would be different given his situation. The first criminal's response reminds me of a story I recently read about Saddam Hussein's capture. Soon after Saddam Hussein's capture—out of a disgusting eight-foot hole—he was flown to a secret location for a meeting with four members of Iraq's Governing Council. They wanted to confirm that it was indeed Saddam Hussein. When the men were offered the chance to see Saddam through a window or by camera, they said, "No, we want to talk to him."

Despite his condition, Saddam was defiant and unrepentant. The report said: "He would not apologize to the Iraqi people. He did not deny any of the crimes he was confronted with having done. He tried to justify them." Four men spent about 30 minutes in a small room, confronting Saddam with his crimes. As they left, one man delivered these final words to the former dictator: "May God curse you. Tell me, when are you going to be accountable to God and the Day of Judgment? What are you going to tell him about the mass graves, the Iran-Iraq war, thousands and thousands executed? What are you going to tell God?" Saddam answered using foul language. Even when he was near death he refused to repent.

The first criminal's response to Jesus was abusive and slandering. What right did he have to talk to Jesus in this manner? Once

again Jesus remains silent but a voice finally speaks up. The voice comes from Jesus' other side. It's the other criminal. Luke makes it read so clearly but I imagine the sentence being jumbled, broken up by gasps of breath as the weight of his body pressed on his lung.

**But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong" (verses 40–41).**

Church history actually has a name recorded of this criminal—Dysmas. Dysmas puts himself in the same category as the other criminal; they are getting what they deserve. On the other hand, Jesus was innocent. Listen to what Alan Keyes says: "Christ is the very epitome of innocence, and without the blood of Christ, shed on Calvary, God's plan of salvation would not have been fulfilled."

It was silent on Golgotha for a few minutes as Dysmas thought about what he just said. As he hung on the cross his response to Jesus became known and Jesus responded to him unlike the others.

**Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."**

**Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (verses 42–43).**

Dysmas confessed that he deserved the punishment he was receiving and confessed that on the cross. At this point in the crucifixion he was not getting down from that cross. But while he hung there he reached out to the only one who could save him.

Dysmas' request was vague; it was for Jesus to remember him when He came into His kingdom. Dysmas knew that Jesus was who He said He was. Jesus was the King of Jews. Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus was the Chosen One. Jesus' response was precise. If Dysmas was asking to be remembered **when**, at an unknown time or hour, Jesus responded with **today**. Today that criminal would be with Jesus in paradise. This criminal's response to Christ defined Christ's response to him. He accepted the only one who could save his soul. We have another case of the last being first. Once again the last have become first in the Kingdom of God.

## **The Centurion's Response**

We've already seen a handful of responses to Jesus but we have two more to look at briefly. Death comes.

**Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.**

**The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man" (verses 46–47).**

A Roman Centurion, a hardened leader of a hundred men, a Gentile, sees Jesus die and his response is to praise God. He

probably didn't understand what he was saying, but nevertheless this is an amazing statement. What convinced him of this? He'd seen countless crucifixions, but there was something about the way Jesus died. What he saw was Jesus die with a loud cry. Victims of crucifixion never died with a loud cry. Victims of crucifixion died after declining for days; they fell unconscious and died feebly and quietly. The fact that Jesus died with a loud cry says He was fully conscious to his very last breath. Jesus was not killed, rather He voluntarily gave up His life. This is what motivated the centurion to respond to the death of an innocent, righteous Jesus in the way he did.

What he didn't see was how the veil of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. Luke places it here right before Jesus' death and before the Centurion's affirmation of faith because of what it symbolized. The veil of the Temple was the thing that separated the Holy Place in the Temple from the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies was where God dwelt and it could be entered only once a year by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. When Jesus died, the locked gates wrapped around God's throne were flung open and He became accessible. When Jesus died, the "Trespassers will be shot" sign that scared off those who approached His dwelling was ripped down and replaced with, "Come on in." Luke concludes this section with the response of the crowd and those who knew Jesus. The crowd's final response was to express their sadness by beating their breast. Those who knew Him stood in shock at the death of an innocent man.

This morning I started out sharing one response to Jesus that I've personally witnessed. We then went on to look at many other responses from those who personally witnessed the death of Jesus. There was a variety in those responses. If we stopped here this message would be incomplete; it would seem like our salvation is based solely on our response to Jesus. The response we didn't look at is the response I'd like to close with—the response of Christ.

The sacrificial system God created wasn't working; we had strayed. God needed to come up with a solution. Jesus was the solution. Jesus responded to the problem and chose to come to earth. He was vulnerable as a baby. He was rejected by men but endured. He was ridiculed but didn't give up. The Apostle John reminds us that, **"God did not send His son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him"** (John 3:17).

The response Jesus made was to atone for our sins so we could experience a personal relationship with God. Atonement is a theological term that talks about covering. It's the work Jesus Christ did in His life and death to earn our salvation. The Apostle Paul tells us that **"while we were sinners Christ died for us"** (Romans 5:8). Jesus Christ, the one and only son of God, was beat. He was rejected. He was despised. He was hung on a cross

so that His blood would cover our sins. His blood would cover our wrong choices and wrong actions.

Going back to my friend and her question about waiting till her deathbed to accept Jesus. The fault in this thinking is: none of us know when we will die. We need to respond to Jesus today. Our response to Christ matters, but it would be worthless if Christ's response to us was anything less than it was. Christ's response was to go all in so we could be saved. When Jesus Christ hung on that cross we were justified. Justification, for those who have accepted Jesus, means that when God sees us it's just as if we

had not sinned. This is why we must constantly return to the cross. We never grow beyond our need for the cross. We never graduate from this. Through Jesus' death we can enter into the Holy of Holies through the torn curtain and know we are completely acceptable, our sins are atoned for, and we're justified in God's sight.

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