

Snatched from the Fire

(The Saving Mercy of Jesus at the Cross)

Luke 23:35-43

Have you ever been in a situation where you needed to be rescued—where you were trapped, helpless, and your only hope was someone else noticing and acting?

Recently, I read about a real rescue on the slopes of Mt. Baker Ski Area in Washington state. A snowboarder named Ian Steger was out with friends in the backcountry when he fell backward into a tree well—a deep, hidden pit of loose snow around a tree's base. He ended up buried upside down, headfirst, completely stuck and suffocating. Only the tips of his snowboard poked out of the snow like faint signals for help. Minutes stretched into what felt like hours as the cold pressed in, stealing his breath. He later said he was starting to black out—he thought, “This is it; I’m going to die alone.”

But then another skier, Francis Zuber, just happened to pass by. After catching a glimpse of Ian's twitching snowboard sticking out from the snow, he stopped immediately, secured his own position so he wouldn't slide away, and began digging frantically with his hands and shovel. “You alright? Can you hear me?” he called. Inch by inch, he cleared the snow—first exposing Ian's face to give him air, then eventually pulling him free. Ian gasped, “Thank you so much for getting me out!” He was rescued just in the nick-of-time.

Snow may be the opposite of fire, but in that moment, it was a deadly, suffocating trap with no self-escape. His life was saved by a compassionate stranger who saw the subtle signs and acted.

Friends, stories like this remind us how quickly life turns perilous. Without warning, we can find ourselves buried under burdens we can't escape alone. And they also challenge us: Will we be the ones who notice the signs and snatch others from danger?

Today, as we unpack Luke 23:35-43, we'll see a far greater rescue—one with eternal stakes. We're going to see a desperate sinner being snatched from the fire of judgment by the merciful hand of Jesus.

Moreover, as we dive into this passage today, we're going to witness one of the most profound moments in all of Scripture—the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ, flanked by two criminals on either side. This isn't just a historical account; it's a mirror reflecting our own hearts and a beacon of hope for every sinner.

Consider with me this darkest time in human history. The air is thick with mockery, the ground stained with blood, and in the midst of it all, the innocent Son of God is hanging on a cross.

Today, I want to draw our attention to a detail that's often overlooked: both criminals crucified on either side of Jesus started out mocking Jesus, just like the rulers and soldiers. Matthew 27:44 tells us, "*And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.*" They both joined the chorus of scorn. But one of them had a radical change of heart.

What caused that shift? I believe it was the presence and glory of Jesus Himself—the love, mercy, and kindness radiating from the Lamb of God even in His suffering. This thief heard Jesus pray, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*" (Luke 23:34), and perhaps in that moment, he thought, "If this man can show mercy to His executioners, maybe there's mercy for a wretch like me."

This story isn't just about one man's redemption; it's a picture of God's saving mercy that snatches sinners from the fire at great cost to Himself. And for those of us who know that salvation, it should fill us with mercy and compassion, compelling us to snatch others from the flames.

To frame this, we'll draw from the powerful imagery in Zechariah 3:1-2, where Joshua the high priest stands accused before the Lord, and God declares him "a brand (burning stick) plucked from the fire." Jude 1:23 builds on this, urging us to "save others by snatching them out of the fire."

Picture a burning stick, half-consumed, blackened and scarred—yanked from the flames not because it's worthy, but by a gracious hand. That's you and me if we're in Christ. We were charred by sin, destined for destruction, but Jesus reached in and pulled us out.

Sermon in a sentence: All who are saved are sticks snatched from the fire, called to snatch others, while never forgetting our own charred past, lest we slip into self-righteousness.

To unfold this theme, we are going to look at our text from the perspective of three categories of people: the mockers on each side of Jesus and the Master in the middle.

1. The Mockers Who Refused the Light – A Hardened Heart

Let's start with **the mockers who refused the light and hardened their hearts**. The majority of people around the cross—the rulers, the soldiers, people passing by, and even one of the criminals next to Jesus persisted in mockery. They stood there, watching Jesus suffer, and instead of being moved, they scoffed. The rulers sneered, "*He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!*" (v. 35). The soldiers mocked, offering sour wine and saying, "*If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!*" (v. 37). And the unrepentant criminal next to Jesus railed, "*Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!*" (v. 39). They all saw the inscription over Jesus' head: "*This is the King of the Jews*" (v. 38). They heard His words, saw His demeanor—but they refused the light.

These mockers represent those who encounter the truth of Jesus but turn away. They were exposed to the same evidence as the repentant thief: Jesus' innocent suffering, His prayer of forgiveness—"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34)—and yet, their hearts hardened.

As Adrian Rogers so powerfully put it, "All people have some light as image bearers of God. But light refused increases darkness. Our decisions about faith and how to live are not neutral. You cannot simply take light or truth and put it on ice. You cannot put truth in your pocket and say, 'That's very interesting; I'll spend it someday if I need it.' When God gives you light, when creation and conscience speak to your heart, if you don't glorify God, don't believe in God, don't trust God, your life will not remain static. You'll begin to regress and lose even the light you have. Your heart will be darkened."

Refusing the light isn't harmless; it calcifies the soul. The Bible warns in Romans 1:21-25 that when people suppress the truth, God gives them over to a debased mind. This unrepentant criminal died in his rebellion, facing eternal judgment—the fire from which there is no rescue.

Beloved, this is a sobering warning. Examine your own heart today. Are there areas where you've heard God's call—in His Word, through conscience, or the gospel—and pushed it aside? Don't presume you will have a last-minute opportunity like the other thief. We don't know when our final breath will come—a sudden accident, an unexpected illness.

Delaying faith is a dangerous gamble with eternity. Light refused only deepens the darkness.

2. The Mocker Who Received the Light – A Changed Heart and Saving Faith

Now, contrast that with the other criminal—the one who started out just as guilty, just as scornful. He's the mocker who received light that changed His heart and brought him to saving faith. Again, Matthew and Mark confirm that both thieves reviled Jesus at first. But something changed in this man. Nailed to his cross, unable to move, his eyes and ears were open. He observed Jesus—His calm under torment, His love in the face of hate. He likely heard those seven sayings from the cross, especially that prayer of mercy:

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

As Charles Spurgeon reflected, “The dying thief saw Jesus when Jesus was in His lowest state, deserted by all His followers, bleeding, suffering, dying; yet he believed that He was a King, and committed himself to Him.” That sight melted his heart.

Listen to his transformation: He rebuked the other criminal, saying, *“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” (vv. 40-41). He feared God, confessed his sin, defended Jesus’ innocence—and then, in simple faith, prayed, “*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*” (v. 42).

This dying thief had no elaborate theology, no good works to offer—he was a charred stick, consumed by a life of crime, teetering on eternal ruin. But he received the light, and it led to repentance and faith.

And Jesus’ response to the thief’s cry from the fire was immediate: “*Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise*” (v. 43). Paradise—not probation, not purgatory—but immediate fellowship with Christ. This is salvation by grace through faith, not merit.

But now some hear this promise given to the thief and object saying: “Isn’t this unfair? The thief got off easy. He lived a life of sin, mocking Jesus until the end, and then a quick prayer saves him?” Beloved, if we think that way, we’ve missed the point. No one deserves mercy. As Romans 3:23 declares, “*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” We’re all sinners deserving God’s justifiable judgment, just as the thief admitted: “We are receiving the due reward of our deeds.” Comparing ourselves to others and saying, “I’m not as bad as that thief”—misses the mark. The standard isn’t humanity’s curve; it’s God’s perfect holiness. In that light, we all fall short.

The old hymn captures it so powerfully: “The dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day; and there may I, though vile as he, wash all my sins away.”

Grace isn’t fair—it’s scandalous, it’s amazing.

And to those who think this encourages waiting until the last minute: That’s foolish. Again, we don’t control how our life will end. We can die of a sudden heart attack or in a tragic accident. And remember, refusing the light now hardens the heart, making later repentance less likely.

Let me also add that though we are NOT saved by faith and works, we are saved unto good works. Charles Spurgeon marveled at the thief: “He had no good works to plead, no long life of godliness to boast of; yet he cast himself upon Jesus, and Jesus received him.” But if Rome had stayed his execution, his faith would have borne fruit—a transformed life, baptism, obedience. True faith always does. But in his case, time was short, yet his trust was real.

This thief represents every believer: a rebel at heart ransomed and redeemed, snatched from the fire.

Again, the Bible gives us a vivid picture of exactly this kind of dramatic rescue in the Old Testament book of Zechariah, chapter 3. In a prophetic vision, the high priest Joshua stands before the angel of the Lord, dressed in filthy garments that represent sin and guilt. Satan stands at his right hand to accuse him—pointing out every failure, every stain, every reason Joshua deserves judgment.

But the Lord confronts Satan sharply: “*The Lord rebuke you, O Satan! ... Is not this a brand plucked from the fire?*” (Zechariah 3:2). Then God commands that Joshua’s filthy clothes be removed and replaced with pure, clean garments. It’s a beautiful symbol of grace: the accused sinner is not cleaned up by his own efforts, but by God’s sovereign mercy—yanked from the consuming flames of judgment at the last possible moment.

That’s exactly what happened to this thief on the cross. He was snatched from the fire like Joshua—accused by Satan, but rescued by grace.

Beloved, again we too were once that burning stick, entangled in sin, doubt, and rebellion. Yet Jesus yanked us out, not by our worth, but by His blood.

3. The Master Whose Light and Mercy Brings Repentance and Saving Faith

Finally, let's turn to the central figure—the man in the middle cross, Jesus, the Master whose light brings repentance and saving faith. Amid all the cruel mockery, He doesn't retaliate. He prays for their forgiveness, endures the pain, and extends paradise to a repentant sinner. His mercy is the light that draws us. At great cost—His life poured out—He snatches sinners from the fire. As Ephesians 2:1-8 reminds us, we were dead in trespasses, children of wrath, but God, rich in mercy, made us alive in Christ by grace through faith.

Like the imagery of a stick snatched from the fire, those of us who have been rescued still bear the marks of those flames—scars from pride, past pain, and ongoing temptations. Full restoration awaits Christ's return, when we'll all have glorified bodies and every trace of sin and the effects of the fall will be erased. Until then we must never forget what we've been saved from. Because remembering our rescue changes us. It cultivates compassion for those still burning and guards against self-righteousness. When we forget, we slip into the accuser's role. We become prideful, our words tear others down rather than build up, they bring harm rather than healing.

I heard a powerful message from pastor Colin Smith on Jude 1:22-23. As he insightfully observed, this call to *“have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire”* demands a response that is both urgent and careful, namely showing compassion to the wavering while hating even the garment stained by the flesh. He stresses that living in light of our own rescue produces **“deep compassion”** for the lost, **“genuine humility”** that keeps us from pride, **“overflowing gratitude”** for the grace we've received, and **“bold courage”** to reach out without compromise. We become rescued rescuers.

Jesus was that light on the cross—the merciful presence that drew even a mocking thief to faith. And now, He calls us to reflect that same light.

In light of this, I appreciate what apologist Wes Huff shared recently in one of his talks. He powerfully suggested that there are five gospels. You may already know the first four: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

But the fifth? It's you. You're the fifth gospel. There are people in your life who may never open those first four, but they're reading you—watching how you live, how you show mercy, how you endure suffering with hope. Your life can be the only gospel some people ever encounter first, and if they see Christ's mercy shining through you, it may draw them to read the true Gospels and meet the Savior who snatched you from the fire.

Once more, Jude 1:23 calls us: "Have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire..." Look around in your life—who's burning? A friend in doubt, a neighbor in sin? Approach them not as a judge, but as a fellow survivor. Live with urgent mercy, pulling others to safety as Jesus pulled you—being that fifth gospel that points them to the cross.

Conclusion

At the cross, we see the divide: mockers refusing light, hardening their hearts; a mocker receiving light, saved in a moment; and the Master whose mercy rescues all who turn to Him.

Oh, if you're still in the flames—charred by sin, far from God—look to the One who was pierced for you. Like the repentant thief, see your own guilt clearly: you deserve condemnation, receiving the due reward of your deeds. Admit that you are justly under sentence, that your sins have earned death.

But also see Jesus clearly: this Man has done nothing wrong. He is innocent, yet He hung there in your place, bearing the wrath you deserved. He is the King who conquered death, offering paradise not to those who think they can earn it, but to beggars who come empty-handed.

If that stirs your heart—if you're poor in spirit, bankrupt before God, with nothing to bring but your need—pray right now, in your own words or like the thief:

"Lord, I fear You as the holy God I've offended. I am guilty—I deserve the condemnation and punishment my sins have earned. I have no excuse, no good deeds to offer. But You have done nothing wrong.

You are innocent, yet You died for sinners like me. Jesus, remember me—have mercy on me—and bring me into Your kingdom. Save me by Your grace alone. I trust You now as my Savior and King. Amen.”

If you prayed that—or something like it—from a broken, believing heart, Scripture promises the same assurance the thief received: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” Salvation is a gift: admit your sin, believe in Christ’s death and resurrection for you, and commit your life to Him.

Beloved, if you’re saved, thank God for plucking you out. Let gratitude soften you and set out to reach the lost in your circle with compassion. We’re all sticks snatched from the fire; now, let’s snatch others out for the greater fame of Jesus.