

RESCUED

God's Story. Your Invitation.

Session 4: He Gave His Life for You

Luke 23:32-46 • about 55 minutes • Leader Guide for 6th Grade TRE

Part 1: Before You Begin

Read this before class. Tonight is the center of the study. Prepare it with special care and pray before class. Some students will hear the crucifixion as a real story for the first time.

Where we are in the story

The students have met Jesus (Session 1), watched him seek the lost (Session 2), and worked out that he is God (Session 3). Tonight they watch the Son of God die for them, and they get an answer to the question the whole study has been reading toward: Why did Jesus have to die? Next week, the tomb is empty.

Tonight's aim

Students discover that Jesus refused to save himself so that he could save us, and that a dying criminal who admitted his sin and turned to Jesus in trust was welcomed that same day. By the end of the hour every student should be able to say, in their own words, that Jesus freely gave his life for our sins, and that anyone who turns to him is welcome.

The passage in plain terms

Jesus is crucified between two criminals at the place called The Skull. His first words are a prayer for the men killing him: Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do (23:34). The rulers, the soldiers, and one of the criminals each throw the same kind of taunt at him, in their own words: if you are who you say you are, save yourself (23:35-39).

The other criminal stops the mockery. He admits that they deserve their sentence and that Jesus has done nothing wrong, and then he turns to Jesus with a request that begins, Jesus, remember me (23:40-42). Jesus answers, Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise (23:43). Darkness covers the land from noon to three, the temple curtain tears, and Jesus dies with a prayer: Father, into your hands I commit my spirit! (23:44-46).

Two details for the students. First, Jesus does not save himself, because saving himself would mean not saving us. Second, the second criminal cannot undo his past or repay anything; what he does is admit his sin, defend Jesus, and turn to him in trust, and Jesus freely welcomes him.

One precision for you, because a student may ask. When we say God died for us, we mean that Jesus, the eternal Son of God, truly died in his human nature. He did not stop being God, and the Father and the Holy Spirit did not die (CCC 626-630).

What the Church teaches

The Church teaches that Christ's death is the unique and definitive sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, offered once for all (CCC 613-614), and that he died for every single person without exception (CCC 605). The Father and the Son are united in this saving love: the Father gave his Son, and the Son freely offered himself (CCC 614-615). The Father already loved us; Jesus did not have to persuade him to start (CCC 604).

Why did the whole human family need this? God made us for friendship with him. Through sin, the human family became wounded and separated from the life God intended for us, and we cannot heal and save ourselves. God did not abandon us; he sent his Son to rescue us and bring us into his life. That is the story in one paragraph, and tonight is its center. Session 7 says more about the wounded condition we are born into and how Baptism heals it.

Isaiah 53, written centuries before, describes a servant wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities, whose stripes heal us (53:5). The Church reads that passage every Good Friday as a description of Jesus. Tonight the students find it themselves, in pairs.

The good thief: the Church has always read him as a striking example of Christ's mercy, and he keeps two things together that students need to hold together. He could not earn God's first gift of grace, and he did respond: he admitted his sin, accepted the justice of his sentence, defended Jesus, and turned to him. God's grace comes first; with his help, we respond by trusting him and turning from sin.

Before you give the clear answer, let the students say what they now think the answer is. Thank every student for answering honestly; some answers will contain real misunderstandings, that the Father hated Jesus, that Jesus had sinned, that God needed someone to hurt before he could love us. Gently correct any that remain, and then give the whole group the clear answer. The night ends in understanding.

Never assign collective blame for Jesus's death to the Jewish people. The Church teaches that sinners were the authors of Christ's Passion, all of us, and that his death cannot be blamed on the Jews of his time as a whole or on Jews today (CCC 597-598).

Saints who said yes

St. Dismas, the good thief

The Gospel does not give his name; an old tradition calls him Dismas, and the Church has honored him for centuries as the patron of prisoners. Devotion has long treated him as the saint for anyone who thinks it is too late. He is the only person in the Gospels to whom Jesus personally promises Paradise, and he could not earn it; he admitted his sin and turned to Jesus, and that was received.

St. Maximilian Kolbe

A Polish Franciscan priest imprisoned at Auschwitz in 1941. When the guards chose ten men to starve to death as punishment, one of them, Franciszek Gajowniczek, cried out for his wife and children. Father Kolbe stepped forward and asked to take his place. The guards agreed. He died two weeks later, and the man he saved lived another fifty-three years and was there when Kolbe was declared a saint in 1982. He freely bore another man's sentence, without pretending he had done anything wrong. So did Jesus.

Questions students may ask

- Why could Jesus not just forgive everyone without dying? God was not forced to save us this way. In his wisdom and love, he chose to save us through his Son's death and Resurrection. Jesus freely offered his life for our sins, overcoming sin and bringing us back to God (John 10:18). The cross shows how completely he loves us.
- Was it God the Father punishing Jesus? No. The Father and the Son together chose this out of love for us, and the Father already loved us before the cross (CCC 604). Jesus was not a victim of his Father; he gave his life freely. Keep it simple: God so loved the world that he gave his Son.
- Did God die? Jesus, the Son of God, truly died in his human nature. He did not stop being God, and the Father and the Holy Spirit did not die. That is a hard idea; say it plainly and do not try to explain more than that tonight.
- What about the other criminal? The Gospel tells us that he mocked Jesus. It does not tell us what happened to him afterward, and neither should we. What we know is that the door was open for him too.
- Did Jesus really feel it? Yes. He was fully human. The nails were real, the thirst was real, the darkness was real. That is what makes his prayer for his killers so astonishing.

Materials

Catholic Bibles with page numbers ready for Luke 23 and Isaiah 53, a crucifix placed where everyone can see it, pencils, name tents, reflection cards.

Timed plan

Welcome and opening prayer, 5 minutes. Opening situation, 5. Reading Luke 23:32-46 in segments, 6. Discovery questions, 16. Flashback to Isaiah 53 in pairs, 6. Personal question, 4. Catholic connection, 6. The big question answered, 3. Prayer, one step, and closing, 4. Total: 55 minutes.

If you are running long: drop discovery question 6 (the darkness and the curtain). Never cut the Isaiah flashback, the big question, or the prayer.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

OPENING PRAYER

Leader prays, everyone answers Amen. Jesus, you refused to save yourself so that you could save us. Tonight we are going to watch you do it. Give us quiet hearts and open eyes. Amen.

WHERE WE ARE IN THE STORY

Read aloud: *We have met Jesus, watched him go looking for the lost, and found out that he is God. Tonight we watch what he does for us, and we answer the question this whole study has been reading toward: why did Jesus have to die?*

OPENING SITUATION

Read aloud: *Imagine you caused damage you cannot repair on your own. Someone who loves you steps forward and freely helps bear the cost of putting it right. They do not pretend they caused the damage. How would you feel? Would you let them?*

Leader: *Keep it brief tonight; the passage needs the time. Then say: No example explains everything about the cross, but hold onto this one: tonight someone who never sinned freely bears the cost for the whole world.*

READ LUKE 23:32-46

Read the passage in segments, in parts: a narrator, Jesus, the rulers and soldiers (one voice), the first criminal, and the second criminal. Read verses 32 to 38, then questions 1 to 3. Read verses 39 to 43, then questions 4 and 5. Read verses 44 to 46, then question 6. Read slowly. Anyone may pass on reading aloud. Give the page number for Luke 23 before you start.

Leader: *Let there be a few seconds of silence after verse 46 before you move on. Do not fill it.*

DISCOVERY QUESTIONS

Read verses 32 to 38

1. What are the first words Jesus says from the cross, in verse 34? Who is he talking about?

Answer • share after the discussion

Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. He is praying for the soldiers who just nailed him to the cross and the leaders who arranged it. Before he says anything else, he forgives the people killing him. That tells you what he came to do.

2. In verses 35 to 38, what do the rulers and the soldiers tell Jesus to do?

Answer • share after the discussion

To save himself, if he is really the Christ. They think that if Jesus were who he says he is, he would come down. They have it backwards. He stays on the cross precisely because he is the Christ.

3. Why does Jesus not save himself? Think about what he came to do.

Answer • share after the discussion

Because saving himself would mean not saving us. He came to seek and to save the lost (Session 2). Coming down from the cross would have saved one person and abandoned everyone else. He chose us.

Leader: Let the students reason toward this themselves. The answer is in Session 2's memory verse, and some will get there on their own.

Read verses 39 to 43

4. Read verses 39 to 42 again. How do the two criminals respond differently to Jesus? What does the second one admit, and what does he ask for?

Answer • share after the discussion

The first criminal joins the mockery: save yourself and us. The second stops him. He admits that they deserve their punishment, he says Jesus has done nothing wrong, and then he turns to Jesus with a request that begins, Jesus, remember me. He does not ask to be rescued from his cross. He admits his sin, defends Jesus, and asks to be remembered.

5. What does Jesus promise him in verse 43? Could the criminal have earned that?

Answer • share after the discussion

Today you will be with me in Paradise. No, he could not earn it. He cannot undo his past or repay anyone. But he admitted his sin and turned to Jesus with faith and repentance, and Jesus freely welcomed him. That is how it works for us too: we cannot earn God's first gift of grace, and with his help we respond by trusting him and turning from sin. It is never too late to turn to Jesus.

Leader: This is the sentence the students should leave with. Keep both halves together: the gift, and the turning.

Read verses 44 to 46

6. In verses 44 to 46, what happens in the sky and in the temple, and what are Jesus's last words?

Answer • share after the discussion

Darkness covers the land from noon to three, the temple curtain tears in two, and Jesus prays, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit! Even dying, he is talking to his Father. Through his death and Resurrection, Jesus opens the way to the Father; he invites us to receive his grace and turn away from the sin that separates us from God.

Leader: *This is the question to drop if you are short on time.*

FLASHBACK: ISAIAH 53, IN PAIRS

Read aloud: *Long before Jesus was born, the Book of Isaiah brought hope to God's people in exile, and it describes a servant of God who suffers for other people's sins. Work in pairs. Half of you find Isaiah 53, verses 4 to 6; the other half find verses 11 and 12. Iniquities and transgressions are old words for sins. In your verses, find three things: who suffers, whose sins are involved, and what the suffering does. Then we will compare.*

Answer • share after the discussion

Isaiah 53:5 says he was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities, and with his stripes we are healed; verses 11 and 12 say he bore the sin of many. The one who suffers is innocent, the sins are ours, and his suffering heals and makes many righteous. It sounds exactly like Jesus on the cross, and it was written centuries before he was born. The Church reads this passage aloud every Good Friday. And remember the Passover lamb from our first session: its blood stood between one family and death. Tonight the blood of the Lamb of God stands between the whole world and death.

Leader: *Give page numbers; Isaiah is hard to find. Let each pair show the group the words that helped them.*

THE PERSONAL QUESTION

Read aloud: *The second criminal turned to Jesus with just a few honest words. If you turned to Jesus right now, what would you want him to remember about you? Write it on your reflection card.*

Leader: *A full minute of silence. Do not ask anyone to share. This one can go deep for some students; be ready to talk with anyone who lingers afterward.*

THE CATHOLIC CONNECTION

Share after the discussion

Here is what the Church says about tonight. Jesus's death on the cross is the one sacrifice that takes away the sins of the whole world, offered once for all (CCC 613-614). He did not die for people in general. He died for every single person, including you (CCC 605). And the Father already loved us; Jesus did not have to persuade him to start (CCC 604). The Father gave his Son, and the Son freely gave himself.

Why did the whole human family need this? God made us for friendship with him. Through sin, the human family became wounded and separated from the life God meant for us, and we cannot heal ourselves. God did not abandon us. He sent his Son to rescue us and bring us into his life.

And the criminal beside him shows how a person receives it. He could not undo his past or repay Jesus. But he admitted his sin and turned to Jesus with faith and repentance, and Jesus freely welcomed him. We cannot earn God's first gift of grace. With God's help, we respond by trusting him, turning from sin, and receiving the life he gives us, above all in the sacraments he gave his Church.

Leader: *If someone asks why God did not just forgive without the cross, use the answer from Part 1: God was not forced to save us this way; in his wisdom and love he chose to, and the cross shows how completely he loves us. If someone asks whether God died, use the precision from Part 1.*

THE BIG QUESTION

Read aloud: *Here is the question this whole study has been reading toward: Why did Jesus have to die? Now that we have read tonight's story, how would you answer it? Say it in your own words.*

Share after the students have answered

Here is the answer we have been reading toward. Jesus did not die because he had sinned; he never sinned. He freely offered his life to the Father for our sins, to bring us back to God. His loving obedience makes up for our disobedience. The Father did not need to be persuaded to love us; the Father and the Son together chose this out of love. And Jesus did not save himself, so that he could save us.

Leader: *Let two or three students answer. Thank each one; do not grade. If an answer carries a misunderstanding, correct it gently and briefly. Then give the whole group the clear answer, in these words or your own.*

PRAYER

Leader: *Remind them, every time: you do not have to feel anything special. Feelings are not the measure of God's grace.*

Read aloud: *Let us pray. Talk to Jesus in your head while I say these words. Jesus, you did not save yourself, so that you could save me. I am sorry for my sins. Remember me, and help me turn to you. Amen.*

ONE STEP THIS WEEK

Read aloud: *One thing this week. Once a day, look at a crucifix, at home, at church, or on a rosary, and say one sentence to Jesus: You did that for me. Nothing else. Just that.*

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, wounded for our sins, you forgave the men who killed you and welcomed a criminal who turned to you. We turn to you. Remember us. Amen.

MEMORY VERSE

“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

TONIGHT'S PASSAGE

Luke 23:32-46 (read aloud in segments); Isaiah 53:4-6 and 11-12 (found live, in pairs)

SUPPORTING REFERENCES

- Luke 19:10 (Session 2's verse, the reason he does not save himself)
- John 10:18 (he lays down his life of his own accord)
- John 3:16 (God so loved the world)

CATECHISM

- CCC 613-614 (Christ's death, the unique sacrifice)
- CCC 604-605 (the Father's love comes first; he died for all)
- CCC 614-615 (the Father's gift and the Son's free offering, together)
- CCC 626-630 (the Son truly died in his human nature)
- CCC 597-598 (no collective blame for the Passion)
- CCC 2005 (feelings are not the measure of grace)

SAINTS WHO SAID YES

- St. Dismas (Luke 23:39-43; the name comes from later tradition)
- St. Maximilian Kolbe (Auschwitz, 1941; canonized 1982)

MATERIALS

Catholic Bibles with page numbers ready for Luke 23 and Isaiah 53, a crucifix placed where everyone can see it, pencils, name tents, reflection cards.

NOTE

Bring a crucifix. The big question is answered after the Catholic connection.