

What Do You Seek?

Session 4: The Man Beside Him

A study for seekers, and for the friends who walk with them

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: The group discovers the saving act itself through the eyes of the one man saved at the cross: that Christ died for our sins as the prophets foretold, that the offer reached a man with nothing left to give, and that two men in identical circumstances gave opposite answers to the same nearness.

Catholic Touchstone: By giving up His own Son for our sins, God manifests that His plan for us is one of benevolent love, prior to any merit on our part: He loved us first (CCC 604).

The Knock and the Door: Piece Four

This week's piece, in one sentence: The wall between us and God was not talked away; it was paid for, in person, on the cross, and the payment was love, not appeasement.

Thread note, leaders only: in every other encounter, Jesus speaks or acts first. On Calvary the thief speaks first, and it is no exception: the initiative here is positional rather than verbal. God arranged to die next to this man. It is the closest Jesus physically comes to anyone in this study. Log it silently; it preaches itself at Session 6.

What You Need to Know

Luke 23:32-43 gives us Christianity's whole grammar in eleven verses. Three crosses; the middle one is the innocent one. One criminal mocks: "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" (23:39): salvation understood as escape. The other rebukes him with a criminal's honesty: "we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong" (23:41), then turns his head and asks: "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power" (23:42).

Weigh what the man does and does not have. No baptism, no catechesis, no restitution, no time, no good works possible; his hands are nailed down. He has honesty about his guilt, and one free ask, addressed to Jesus by name, in faith that a man dying beside him has a kingdom. And the answer outruns the request: he asked to be remembered someday; he is promised company today: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (23:43).

A translation note to disclose plainly: the RSV reads "when you come in your kingly power," with the familiar "when you come into your kingdom" as the variant Greek reading many know from the liturgy. Same request either way: he believes the dying man reigns.

The two thieves are the session's second lesson, and they are this study's frame in miniature: identical sentences, the same nearness to the same Christ, opposite responses. Nearness alone saves neither; the same knock is answered by one and refused by the other. Do not moralize this in session; let the geometry of the scene do the work.

On atonement, hold the Catholic balance and its honest latitude. The Church has never defined a single theory of how the cross saves; sacrifice, satisfaction, ransom, and victory are complementary lenses, not

competitors. What is fixed: this was God's own initiative of love (CCC 604), the Son's free self-gift, not an angry Father punishing an innocent third party. Say it that carefully, because the steelman turns on it.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Isaiah 53:5, 12. Written centuries before: “he was wounded for our transgressions... and with his stripes we are healed,” and, astonishingly for tonight's scene, “he was numbered with the transgressors.” The geometry of Calvary, an innocent counted among criminals, sits in the text the group will find live.

1 Corinthians 15:3. The earliest creed, met in Session 3, states the meaning in one clause: “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.” Paul does not name the passage, but Isaiah 53 is the scripture the Church has always heard first behind that clause.

Genesis 3:23-24. Eden's exit: the man driven out, and the way back to the tree of life guarded. Background for the Dig Deeper; the word Jesus speaks to the thief, Paradise, is the Greek word for that garden.

Voices of the Church

St. Ambrose *Exposition of the Gospel of Luke (summary)*

Ambrose lingers on the arithmetic of verse 43: the thief asked only to be remembered, and received Paradise, today, with Christ. The Lord, he observes, always gives more than He is asked. A faithful summary of his comment rather than a quotation.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem *Catechetical Lectures (summary)*

Teaching converts in fourth-century Jerusalem, within sight of Calvary, Cyril points his catechumens to the thief as proof of what Christ's mercy can give to repentant faith even at the last hour: a man entered Paradise from a cross on a single believing plea. A faithful summary of his teaching.

Commonly attributed to St. Augustine *attribution uncertain; the tradition is ancient*

“Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned.” The line's exact source cannot be verified in Augustine's works, so we hand it on as the tradition hands it on: shorthand for the warning and the hope the two crosses hold together. The Church has never pronounced on the second criminal's final state; the line teaches against presumption and despair, not a verdict on one man.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 601:** Christ's redemptive death fulfills Isaiah's suffering-servant prophecy; “for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.”
- **CCC 604:** the cross as God's initiative of benevolent love, prior to any merit of ours: He loved us first.
- **CCC 1021:** the words of Christ to the good thief cited as the Church's teaching that each soul meets its Lord without delay.

Hosting Your Seeker Friend

This Week's Coaching

This is the heaviest night of the study, and heaviness is not a problem to be fixed. If the room goes quiet after the reading, let it; a leader who can sit in silence for twenty seconds teaches more about the cross

than one who fills it. Your friend may carry grief this session touches, a death, a diagnosis, a person they could not save; if tears come, kindness and normalcy, never a spotlight. And expect the fairness question in some form: what about people who never get a chance? Do not improvise a system. Point at the text: the thief had no resume, no ritual, no time, and one honest, believing sentence was met with mercy; the mercy on display is wider than our categories, and the Church has always said God is not limited by the ordinary paths He gives us. Park the rest for the walk to the car.

Thread Watch (leader only)

- **The First Word:** the apparent exception: the thief speaks first, but the nearness was arranged. Initiative by position. Log it; it becomes the most moving line of the Session 6 arc-trace.
- **Doors and Thresholds:** Paradise is the Greek word for the garden humanity was locked out of in Genesis 3. The guarded way reopens, today. Protect the detail in the Dig Deeper; connect nothing.
- **The two answers:** same knock, two responses. This is the free-will frame embodied; it gets named at Session 6, not tonight.

Session Goals

1. Present Piece Four: the wall was paid for in person, and the payment was love.
2. Walk Luke 23:32-43 inductively, weighing what the thief had and lacked, and what he was promised.
3. Land the live discovery in Isaiah 53: wounded for our transgressions, numbered with the transgressors.
4. Steelman the strongest modern objection to the cross and answer it with the Church's actual teaching, including its honest latitude on atonement theories.
5. Let the two thieves pose, without pressure, the question of the two possible answers.

Time Note

- 75 minutes of content in a 90-minute evening. If long: cut the Dig Deeper first, then trim Build question
2. Never cut the silence after the primary reading; budget for it on purpose.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening

Leader prays alone, briefly.

“God, tonight we are going to the hardest place in the story. Keep us honest, keep us gentle, and let us see what is actually there. Amen.”

The Knock and the Door (read aloud, under 3 minutes)

Piece Four: Paid in Person

“The pieces so far: you were made for God; something real stands in the way; and the answer is a person who claimed the identity only God can hold. Tonight, the fourth piece, the center of the whole message. Christianity does not claim the wall was explained away, or that God decided to grade on a curve. It claims the wall was paid for, and that God paid it in person. Not an angry deity taking it out on an innocent bystander; the One on the cross is the offended party Himself, absorbing the cost of forgiving. Anyone who has ever truly forgiven a serious wrong knows forgiveness is never free; the forgiver eats the debt. The cross is God eating the debt, in public, in history, on purpose. Tonight we watch it happen through the eyes of the one man who was close enough to touch it.”

Win

Steve Jobs, a year after his cancer diagnosis, told Stanford's graduating class: “Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life.” Mortality, he argued, burns away everything that does not matter.

1. Why do people mostly avoid thinking about death, and what happens to the ones who manage to face it?
2. If you knew your time was short, what would move to the top of the list? What would fall off it?

Build

Read Luke 23:32-43 aloud, slowly. Then let the room be quiet for a moment before the first question.

1. Two criminals, both justly condemned by the second man's own admission, same sentence, crucified on either side of the same Jesus. Listen to what each one says (vv. 39-42). What is the difference between the two men, at bottom?
2. Inventory the second thief. What does he have going for him: baptism, good works, time to reform, anything? What does he actually bring to this exchange?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The first thief wants escape: save yourself and us; God as a way out of consequences. The second begins with honesty, “we are receiving the due reward of our deeds,” then makes one free ask in faith: remember me. The only differences between the two men are truthfulness about guilt and the direction they turn their heads. And the inventory of the second is empty: no ritual, no record, no future, hands nailed down. He brings honesty and a request; everything else is Christ's gift. What the scene displays is not an entrance fee at all but gratuitous mercy, received in repentant faith by a man with nothing left to pay, which is either scandalous or the best news ever spoken, and possibly both.

3. Jesus answers, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” Compare the request with the answer. What did the man ask for, and what is he given?

4. An innocent man dying between two criminals: the early Christians insisted this exact picture was written down centuries in advance. Let's find it.

Live discovery: *have the group find Isaiah 53 and read verses 5 and 12 aloud. Give them time with verse 12's last lines.*

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

He asked to be remembered someday; he is promised presence today, and not admission but company: "with me." The answer outruns the ask, which the saints noticed early and often. Then Isaiah: "wounded for our transgressions... with his stripes we are healed," and the line that maps tonight's geometry exactly: "numbered with the transgressors," followed by "made intercession for the transgressors," which is precisely what the middle cross is doing for the man beside it. The earliest creed we met last week, "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3), has Isaiah 53 as the background text the Church has always read behind it.

Where the Skeptic Is Strongest (steelman)

Say the hard version out loud: "The atonement is divine child abuse. A father punishing an innocent son to satisfy his own anger is monstrous, and if God wanted to forgive, why not just forgive? Why does anyone have to bleed?" Grant the force of it: if the cross were a third party absorbing a tyrant's rage, the objection would win. But the Christian claim, said precisely, is that the One on the cross is God: the offended party Himself, freely taking the cost of forgiveness into His own body. And the second question answers itself from ordinary life: nobody just forgives. Forgive a real debt, a real betrayal, and you absorb it; the loss lands on the forgiver, always. The cross is that universal law at full scale: God forgiving, and paying what forgiving costs, in person. Be honest about the latitude too: the Church has never locked salvation's mechanics into one theory; sacrifice, ransom, satisfaction, victory are four windows on one act. What is non-negotiable is the direction of the love: He loved us first.

Dig Deeper (optional)

The word Jesus chooses, Paradise, is the Greek word for a walled garden, the Old Testament's word for Eden. Genesis 3 ends with humanity driven out and the way back guarded. So the last conversation Jesus has before dying is a promise to walk a criminal back up the one way that has been guarded since the beginning of the story, today. If your group has been noticing recurring images, protect your smile and move on.

Send

3. "Same nearness to the same Christ, opposite answers." What made the difference between the two thieves, and is that thing available to anyone in this room?
4. The man brought honesty and one free ask; everything else was gift. Which of those two comes harder for you?

Live It This Week

1. Try Job's tool once this week: make one decision as if your time were short, and notice what it clarifies.
2. Read Isaiah 53 in full, alone, once. Just read it; it is twelve verses.
3. Optional: read John 3:1-21 before next time. A respected man comes with his questions at night.

Closing

Leader alone, briefly: “Jesus, remembered beside you is enough. Remember every one of us. Amen.”

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power. And he said to him, Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” **Luke 23:42-43**

Before you dismiss: hand out Take-Home 4; standing sealed-sheet reminder: two sessions to go.

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Every Passage in This Session

Primary Text

- Luke 23:32-43, three crosses, two answers, one promise

Live Discovery Text

- Isaiah 53:5, 12, wounded for our transgressions; numbered with the transgressors

Supporting Texts

- 1 Corinthians 15:3, recalled: died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures
- Genesis 3:23-24, the guarded way back to the garden (Dig Deeper)

Catechism

- CCC 601, 604, 1021

Memory Verse

- Luke 23:42-43

The Knock and the Door

- Piece Four: the wall paid for in person; two thieves, two answers to the same nearness