

Rescue for the Captives

Luke 23:33-43

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

November 23, 2025/Reign of Christ

Today is the last sermon in our series based on themes explored in a book I read on my sabbatical called *The Big Relief* by David Zahl.

For eight sermons this fall, we've been exploring the "urgency of grace for a worn-out world," looking at how the gospel offers relief in a variety of areas of our life, whether it's guilt or status anxiety or rejection or others.

I'm not going to review them all because my time is short this morning. You are welcome to go back and listen or read online.

The final theme we'll be looking at is the biggest one: "Rescue: The Relief from Captivity (and Death)."

Today is also Christ the King Sunday which is the last Sunday of the Christian year before Advent begins.

Today is *also* Eternity Sunday or Memorial Sunday. The last Sunday of the Christian year has often been the day where many Mennonite churches (and others) reflect upon and light candles for those we have lost in the past year and beyond.

So, I'm going to be trying to bring together themes of rescue, the kingship of Christ, and the defeat of death. And I'm going to try to do it in around 15 minutes. 😊

On, for my last words in this series, I want to begin with Jesus' first public words in the gospel of Luke.

At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus visits his hometown of Nazareth. He enters a synagogue on the Sabbath and reads aloud from the scroll of Isaiah, part of chapter 61:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives
and release to the prisoners,
²to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:16-19).

Then he hands the scroll back to the attendant, sits down, and says, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

There's so much going on in this scene, not least where Jesus stops reading in Isaiah (he leaves out "the day of vengeance of our God," which didn't make his listeners very happy... people have always loved a bit of vengeance against their enemies!).

But I want to focus on one part. *To proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners.*

Who is Jesus talking about here? Who are the captives? Who are the prisoners?

I think when we hear Jesus' words here, our minds may instinctively make a connection to the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor, the meek, the persecuted... the oppressed and downtrodden, the ones on the bottom that Jesus so beautifully lifts up.

And this is true. The news of the gospel is undoubtedly good news who find themselves on the wrong end of life's cruel metrics, who are more acquainted with losing than winning.

But in the broadest possible sense, when Jesus talks about liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, he is talking about all of us.

Perhaps you don't like to think of yourself as a captive or a prisoner. It's not a category that I am particularly fond of myself!

"Captivity" is a word that makes us sound helpless, powerless. And of course, prisoners are *usually* people who have done bad things.

We prefer to imagine ourselves as free, autonomous, maybe even virtuous. And we are. Kind of. Sometimes. To varying degrees.

But this does not tell the whole truth of who we are.

We all also captives. And we are held captive by two things. Sin and death.

Let's start with sin. Here's how David Zahl puts it in this chapter of his book:

Sin is a tricky word. It has less to do with individual misdeeds and **more to do with disordered desire. It names the way we love the wrong things too much and the right things too little**, such that our best plans go askew and we frequently hurt the ones we love. It's almost as though we live with an internal distortion field that is constantly twisting our affections in a self-seeking direction. Sin is the inherited condition of fallen humanity—the internal dimension of our captivity.¹

I think Zahl's description of sin is exactly right. And I think we all recognize it in our own lives. Not always to the same extent or degree. Not always with the same consequences.

Some sin has devastating consequences (for ourselves and for others), some barely makes an observable ripple.

But I think we are all well-acquainted with “disordered desire,” with loving the wrong things too much and the right things too little.

It echoes the language of Paul in Romans 7:

²¹ So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²² For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me.

¹ David Zahl, *The Big Relief: The Urgency of Grace for a Worn-Out World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2025), 145.

Paul did not write the letter to the Romans while he was still Saul, still rampaging around persecuting Christians. He did not write these words before Jesus encountered him on the road to Damascus and cleaned him up and set him on the right path.

Paul is “all in” on Jesus at this point. And he still experiences this inner battle with sin.

This is the human condition and Romans 7 names it with devastating accuracy.

I’ll never forget the first time I read that passage with the guys in the jail. A few of them couldn’t believe it was in the Bible. Many of them said it described their struggle perfectly.

And then death.

Again, Zahl puts it well. Even if we are living more or less virtuous lives, he says, even if our battle with sin isn’t as obviously debilitating as it may be for others, there is another area in which we long for rescue.

If that place hasn’t made itself known yet, it will. I say that with confidence and without any intended condescension. It doesn’t matter who we are or how impressive our capabilities, we are alike in one core respect: our mortality. Modern medicine and the science of longevity may give us a few extra years with our loved ones... but none of these things can postpone the end indefinitely. Each and every one of us will die. You and I may balk at thinking of ourselves in need of rescue in other instances, but not here. Here, the truth of our predicament crystallizes.²

Indeed. Again, this is the human condition.

So, sin and death. The great enemies of human flourishing. The twin realities that threaten to undo the goodness we were made to pursue, the faith, hope, and love that we were created for.

These are our captors.

And Jesus stands up in Nazareth, before he has embarked upon his teaching and healing ministry, before he has denounced corrupt authorities, and certainly before he has hung

² Zahl, 149.

upon a cross and emerged out of an empty tomb and says, “These Scriptures are fulfilled in your hearing.”

I am the one who releases the captives, who sets the prisoners free.

How?

As I mentioned, this week, many churches around the world celebrate “Christ the King” or “Reign of Christ” Sunday.

The gospel text chosen for this day is of Jesus hanging on a cross between two criminals, dying an excruciating death, with a mocking title affixed above his head. “The King of the Jews.”

Not a throne but a cross. Not a crown of gold but one of thorns.

This is our king. This is how his kingdom comes. This is how sin is judged and, with the empty tomb, death defeated.

This is how Jesus rescues the captives and sets the prisoners free.

On the cross, I think we see most clearly who God is and how God loves us.

Much earlier in Israel’s story, the people wanted a “king like the other nations.” The prophet Samuel warned them what this would actually be like, with a constant refrain: “He will take...” Sons, daughters, crops, taxes... the taking will never end!

And so it proved to be, from King Saul onward. Israel had a few impressive kings, but mostly it was a fairly miserable parade of corruption and wickedness.

Christ as king doesn’t take. He gives. He gives his very self to us, to the world.

This is good news in light of what we are going to be doing in a moment, remembering loved ones we have loved and lost.

The criminal on the cross speaks three words to Jesus on the cross within which I think could fit all human hope and desire and longing.

Jesus, remember me.

We don't know what this man had done throughout his life; we don't even know why he was hanging there with Jesus.

We can imagine that his life was not exactly a model of virtue—he acknowledges that he is getting what he deserves, much as we shudder to think of *anyone* “deserving” crucifixion—but we don't know the specifics.

Whatever he has done, whatever has been done to him, whatever ways in which sin and death have coloured his experience of the world, he speaks these three words. *Jesus remember me.*

This is what all of us long for. To be remembered by Jesus.

And these three words were enough.

In a few moments, we will be lighting candles and remembering people dear to us who are no longer with us. And we do so in the hope and the confidence that the king that we serve, the king to whom we bend the knee in reverence and admiration and love, *remembers* us, remembers our losses, remembers those whose absence we feel today.

Our king has walked the road of suffering and loss, pain and death before us.

Jesus can identify with our sorrow, for all the ways in which sin and death leave a mark upon our lives.

But he can do so much more than identify with us. Our king has not only walked the road; he has also emerged out the other side, defeating sin and conquering death.

He holds out hope from the other side of death. His cross and empty tomb declare that death and sin are defeated enemies whose time will run out.

He speaks of a future where every tear will be wiped away, where,

There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

A future where he sits on the throne and says, "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev. 21:5).

It is because of what God has done in Christ that we do not grieve as those who have no hope; we are reminded that while death still stings, it is never the last word in God's story or in ours.

Because of what God has done in Christ—because of how God has *lived* and *loved* in Christ, because of how God reigns and remembers in Christ—we do not grieve as those who have no hope; we are reminded that while death still stings, it is never the last word in God's story or in ours.

We have a Rescuer. One who not only *proclaims* liberty to captives and release to the prisoners but accomplishes it on Calvary's cross and in an empty tomb.

Sin and death remain part of our experience this side of eternity. But their time is short. And God's future is long.

This is good news. This is the best news.

Thanks be to God.

