

Week 38: OUR CHOICE

Meet Edwin Thomas, a master of the stage. During the latter half of the 1800s, this small man with the huge voice had few rivals. Debuting in *Richard III* at the age of fifteen, he quickly established himself as a premier Shakespearean actor.

In New York, he performed *Hamlet* for one hundred consecutive nights. In London, he won the approval of the tough British critics. When it came to tragedy on the stage, Edwin Thomas was in a select group.

When it came to tragedy in life, the same could be said as well.

Edwin had two brothers, John and Junius. Both were actors, although neither rose to his stature. In 1863, the three siblings united their talents to perform *Julius Caesar*. The fact that Edwin's brother John took the role of Brutus was an eerie harbinger of what awaited the brothers—and the nation—two years hence.

For this John who played the assassin in *Julius Caesar* is the same John who took the role of assassin in Ford's Theatre. On a crisp April night in 1865, he stole quietly into the rear of a box in the Washington theater and fired a bullet at the head of Abraham Lincoln. Yes, the last name of the brothers was Booth—Edwin Thomas Booth and John Wilkes Booth.

Edwin was never the same after that night. Shame from his brother's crime drove him into retirement. He might have never returned to the stage had it not been for a twist of fate at a New Jersey train station. Edwin was awaiting his coach when a well-dressed young man, pressed by the crowd, lost his footing and fell between the platform and a moving train.

Without hesitation, Edwin locked a leg around a railing, grabbed the man, and pulled him to safety. After the sighs of relief, the young man recognized the famous Edwin Booth.

Edwin, however, didn't recognize the young man whom he had just rescued. That knowledge came weeks later in a letter—a letter that he carried in his pocket to the grave. A letter from General Adams Badeau, chief secretary to General Ulysses S. Grant. A letter thanking Edwin Booth for saving the life of the child of an American hero, Abraham Lincoln. How ironic that while one brother killed the president, the other brother saved the president's son. The boy whom Edwin Booth yanked to safety? Robert Todd Lincoln.²⁰

Edwin and John Booth. Same father, mother, profession, and passion—yet one chooses life, the other, death. How could it happen? I don't know, but it does. Though their story is dramatic, it's not unique.

Abel and Cain, both sons of Adam. Abel chooses God. Cain chooses murder. And God lets him.

Abraham and Lot, both pilgrims in Canaan. Abraham chooses God. Lot chooses Sodom. And God lets him.

David and Saul, both kings of Israel. David chooses God. Saul chooses power. And God lets him.

Peter and Judas, both deny their Lord. Peter seeks mercy. Judas seeks death. And God lets him.

In every age of history, on every page of Scripture, the truth is revealed: God allows us to make our own choices.

And no one delineates this more clearly than Jesus. According to him, we can choose a narrow gate or a wide one, a narrow road or a wide one, or the big crowd or the small crowd (see Matthew 7:13–14). We can

choose to build on rock or sand (see verses 24–27), serve God or riches (see 6:24), or be numbered among the sheep or the goats (see 25:32–33).

God is omnipotent—meaning he is all-powerful. But he has chosen to limit his power in one area of his creation: our human will. He will not force himself or his ways upon us. He gave his creation the dignity of choice—choosing whether or not we will accept his offer of forgiveness, repent of our sin, and turn to him.

Jesus' forgiveness is a done deal, accomplished at Calvary. However, "Calvary's trio" of crosses reminds us that we must personally accept and embrace this gift in our lives.

Ever wonder why there were two crosses next to Christ? Why not six or ten? Ever wonder why Jesus was in the center? Why not on the far right or far left? Could it be that the two crosses on the hill symbolize one of God's greatest gifts? The gift of choice.

The two criminals have so much in common. Convicted by the same system. Condemned to the same death. Surrounded by the same crowd. Equally close to the same Jesus. In fact, they begin with the same sarcasm: "The two criminals also said cruel things to Jesus" (Matthew 27:44 CEV). But one changed.

"One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' 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.' 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'" (Luke 23:39–43).

Much has been said about the prayer of the penitent thief, and it certainly warrants our admiration. But while we rejoice at the thief who changed, dare we forget the one who didn't? What about him, Jesus? Wouldn't a personal invitation be appropriate? Wouldn't a word of persuasion be timely?

There are times when God sends thunder to stir us. There are times when God sends blessings to lure us. But then there are times when God sends nothing but silence as he honors us with the freedom to choose where we spend eternity. Have we been given any greater privilege than that of choice? Not only does this privilege offset any injustice, but the gift of free will can also offset any mistakes.

Think about the thief who repented. Though we know little about him, we know this: he made some bad mistakes in life. He chose the wrong crowd, the wrong morals, the wrong behavior. But would you consider his life a waste? Is he spending eternity reaping the fruit of all the bad choices he made? No, just the opposite. He is enjoying the fruit of the one good choice he made. In the end all his bad choices were redeemed by a solitary good one.

How can two brothers be born of the same mother, grow up in the same home, and one choose life and the other choose death? I don't know, but they do.

How could two men see the same Jesus and one choose to mock him and the other choose to pray to him? I don't know, but they did.

And when one prayed, Jesus loved him enough to save him. And when the other mocked, Jesus loved him enough to let him. He allowed him the choice.

He does the same for you.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

- God allows you to make your own choice when it comes to following him.
- God has chosen to limit his power over his creation in regard to human will.
- You must personally accept and embrace the gift of God's salvation.
- God honors you with the freedom to choose where you spend eternity.

MEMORY VERSES

Your verses to memorize for this unit are Colossians 1:13–14. Take a few moments to review these verses, and then write them out from memory in the space below.

The Heart of Jesus



Forgiveness was not a foreign concept to the Pharisees. After all, they obeyed the Law, attended the feasts, and brought their sacrifices to the Lord. In the heart of their city, the temple was a hubbub of priestly activity. The savory smoke of grilled meat filled the air as it rose toward heaven. Morning sacrifices. Evening sacrifices. Offerings brought for firstborn babies, for the new harvests, for thanksgiving, and as a tithe. Animal after animal took its place on the altar so that God would not be angry with the people. The prayers, the worship, the sacrifices—they were a familiar backdrop to every Jew's life in Jerusalem. But when the *perfect* sacrifice came through town, they missed him completely. In fact, their plotting brought about his capture, his trial, his sentence, and his sacrifice. But Jesus didn't hold it against them. He offered them the same choice he offers to everyone—forgiveness.

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

READ: MATTHEW 25:31-46 AND LUKE 23:39-43

1. Jesus once told a parable to explain what will happen at the end of the age when he returns in glory. What will Jesus do with the people before him (see Matthew 25:31-33)?
2. What will Jesus say to the "sheep" on his right who have faithfully followed after him? What reasons does he give for these blessings (see verses 34-40)?
3. What will Jesus say to the "goats" on his left who refused to follow after him? What reasons does he give for these judgments against them (see verses 41-46)?
4. What does Jesus' parable reveal about the consequences people face if they do not choose to accept his offer of salvation and follow him in loving and serving others?
5. The criminals who hung on the crosses near Jesus also had a choice to make regarding their salvation. What choice did the first criminal make (see Luke 23:39)?
6. The second criminal had a completely different attitude. What request did he make of Jesus? How did Christ respond to him (see verses 40-43)?
7. How do you respond to the fact that God leaves the choice of where you will spend eternity up to you? Who in your life do you need to encourage to follow after Jesus?