

PM Luke 23:26-43 The Conversion of a Dying Thief

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Date: 26 June 2022

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[0 : 0 0] down to verse 43. So that can be found on page 1064 of the Church Bibles. Luke 23, verses 26 to 43.

This is the account of the crucifixion. And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross to carry it behind Jesus.

And there followed him a great multitude of people, and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. But turning to them, Jesus said, Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.

For behold, the days are coming when they will say, Blessed are the barren and the wombs that have never bore, nor the breasts that have never nursed. For they will begin to say to the mountains, fall on us, and to the hills cover us.

For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry? Two others who were criminals were led away and put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called the skull, there they crucified him and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

[1 : 2 2] And Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by watching, and the rulers scoffed at him, saying, He saved others, let him save himself.

If he is the Christ of God, his chosen one. The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.

There was also an inscription over him, This is the king of the Jews. One of the criminals who were hanged, railed at him, saying, Are you not the Christ?

Save yourself and us. But the other rebuked him, 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. And he said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And he said to him, Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.

[2 : 3 4] Amen. We could ask you to turn back to Luke chapter 23 again. Luke chapter 23.

And this evening we'll just be covering the last four verses of that text. The conversion of the dying thief. Or the thief on the cross. And so we'll just read the last four verses together again.

So that's from verse 39 to 43. One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, Are you not the Christ?

Save yourself and us. But the other rebuked him, saying, Do you not fear God, since you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds.

But this man has done nothing wrong. And he said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And he said to him, Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.

[3 : 39] Now this is perhaps one of the most well-known and well-loved and probably one of the more encouraging passages of the Bible. It takes us right to Calvary, to Christ's last few hours before his death.

And a day that for many looked like a very tragic and a very hopeless end. But for this one criminal in this passage, it ended up being a wonderful new beginning.

Now we know that there were two thieves crucified that day, one on the left and one on the right. And Matthew and Mark both tell us that both men were mocking him earlier on and hurling abuse at him.

Luke is the only one of the writers who tells us about the thief who was suddenly and dramatically converted. He goes from being a convicted thief and a blasphemer one minute to a born-again believer the next.

So what happened? Well, we know we can only put this down to the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration. And briefly, we'll see this evening how the Holy Spirit brings within this man three convictions.

[4 : 47] Firstly, we'll see that this man gets a true knowledge of God. Secondly, a true knowledge of himself and his sin. And then thirdly, a true knowledge of Christ as the Messiah.

And then finally, we'll see how Christ gives him assurance. So as we pick up the narrative in verse 39, we're at Calvary. Christ is hanging on the cross.

And the rulers and the soldiers are all around mocking him, fulfilling the words of Psalm 22, which we sang earlier, when we read that, dogs encompass me, a company of evildoers encircle me, they stare and gloat over me.

Though by now, there is one voice missing. One of the thieves has gone quiet. And the other one just continues to mock Christ in the same way as he did before and in the same way as the crowds.

If you are the Christ, save yourself and come down. But notice this thief, he says something extra when he calls out. He says, Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us.

[5 : 53] It's like he's saying, you know, the least you could do is help out your fellow sufferers here at this point who are hanging with you. But though he doesn't know it, inside this very sarcastic and cruel comment, there is a nugget of truth.

Because when you think about it, that's what Christ was on the cross to do. To save men. By bearing the wrath of God in their place. So in those agonizing hours during the crucifixion, he was to be a substitute, taking the penalty for everyone who would believe in him.

And he was saving at that moment the man on the other side of the cross. He was actually saving the one who was silent. Christ is choosing to lay down his own life for this man on this side and for his own elect for eternity.

Now we see this thief the one who has been saved. He speaks up. And instead of mocking Jesus as he does early with his friend, he rebukes his friend.

He says, Do you not fear God? Now this is quite a turnaround. This man has all of a sudden got himself a very clear view of who God is.

[7 : 07] And it gives him a real fear of God. And we can perhaps think of this as the first mark of somebody coming to saving faith. Proverbs 9.10 says, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Now the fear of the Lord comes from a right understanding of who God really is. In his sovereignty, in his holiness, and in his righteousness, and in judgment, it's become very clear to this criminal that he and his fellow thief will soon stand before God.

And this knowledge and conviction has stirred him and disturbed him through and through. This man is well aware of judgment because after all, at this very moment, he is under the judgment of the Roman authorities.

He is feeling the physical pain that he is due for his worldly crimes. And he realizes that all of this, all this agonizing death on the cross will pale into insignificance in a few hours' time when he must stand before God and face the consequences for his eternal crimes.

Because he has broken a higher law and he will endure the tortures of hell for eternity. So he rightly recognizes that he should not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul.

[8 : 23] But rather he fears him who can destroy both body and soul in hell. And this solemn reality check has this man humbled and penitent.

Which brings us to our second point, his conviction of sin which leads to repentance. And we can read there in verse 41, he says back to the other criminal, And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward for our deeds.

So first we notice this man is making no excuses. He is not sort of playing the victim which is quite refreshing for our ears today. He is not trying to justify himself.

He doesn't blame his upbringing. He doesn't blame bad company. He doesn't blame even poverty for his situation. And we think especially he doesn't blame Satan for his sin.

He is convicted that in his own hearts, his own heart, that his own actions have led to this. Samuel Rutherford who was a minister in the 17th century over at Anworth near Gatehouse of Fleet, he says, A repenting man is more angry with his own heart that consenteth him to sin than he is with the devil who did tempt him to sin.

[9 : 40] So this man, he knows his own guilt. And first and foremost that he has offended God. With David in Psalm 51, he can really say, Against you and you only have I sinned.

And then in contrast to his guilt, he then goes on to speak about Christ's own sinlessness. He knew Christ was innocent. He says, But this man has done nothing wrong. Now how much this thief knew about Christ when he went to the cross, we don't know.

He would have heard Christ saying on the cross, Father forgive them for they know not what they do. And he may have heard about the miracles that Christ did and perhaps why he was being crucified under blasphemy charges.

But whether he knew much or didn't know a lot, all of a sudden something just seemed to click. Something, a light went on in his head. And as we thought about earlier, it's the Holy Spirit who gives men this light by making Christ precious to them as the pure, spotless Lamb of God.

So if he did know much about Christ, if he did know much about Christ or if he didn't know much about Christ when he went to the cross, well he certainly does now. His eyes have been opened and this can only be down to the sovereign will of God.

[10 : 58] And then thirdly, we see his faith and his trust in Christ as the only one who can save him. In verse 42, and he said, Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.

So notice first of all, he recognizes that Christ has authority. He says he has a kingdom so therefore he must be a king. And the king is the only one who can pardon him.

Again in this we see the thief's humility as he asks to be remembered that Jesus in glory would think of him and perhaps he might be able to go where Christ is going.

He's not presumptuous and he knows he deserves nothing. Which makes Christ's response all the more wonderful when in verse 43 he says, Truly I say to you today you will be with me in paradise.

So even in Christ dying moments on the cross when he is at his weakest physically he is still full of compassion and love and strong and mighty to save.

[12 : 01] And what a kind saviour we have that would do this. J.C. Ryle says, He heard and granted a sinner's petition. He opened to him the gate of life.

And assurance really is a wonderful thing to have. To hold on to the promises in scripture. Like 1 John 1.9 if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

And Hebrews 7.25 Consequently he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him since he always lives to make intercession for them.

So in application let us ask ourselves and let us consider do we truly fear God for who he is? Have we ever come to a point in our lives when all we can do is acknowledge our guilt?

We come to him confessing our sins we make no excuses we have no desire to justify ourselves. And then do we have concern for our fellow man as this criminal did for his friend in an evangelistic way?

[13 : 10] I never mentioned it before but at the start of this this conversation was started because the repentant thief was rebuking his friend on the other side. He was trying to bring him to his senses telling him about God and his sin.

So let's make the most of conversations we may have and gospel tracts and literature and always to be ready to make a defence for the faith. And then also let us ask ourselves do we think about Christ much and eternal matters?

Do we think about his attributes as this man thought about Christ's innocence his mercy and sovereignty and his life and death as our saviour? And have we called out to him in mercy to save us?

So as we've seen from these four verses from this very brief passage about a criminal at the end of his life we see all this wonderful fruit of salvation. He only had a short time left only a few hours but we see all this wonderful and beautiful fruit and God provided it.

And we too if we rest in Christ one day we will be with him in paradise as the Apostle Paul says in Philippians it really will be a case of to live is Christ and then to die is gain.

[14 : 22] Amen.

We will close our time of worship by singing in Psalm 73 Psalm 73a actually from verses 21 to 28 that can be found on page 95