

Today You Will be with Me in Paradise

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[0 : 00] Can we open our Bibles, please, in Luke's Gospel, Luke chapter 24, reading at verse 43. Luke 23, sorry, yes, Luke 23, verse 43. We'll read it from 39 to get the picture. 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. These words, truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise. Ten years ago, I was riding my motorcycle around Loch Ness.

[1 : 25] And all of a sudden, the car in front of me stopped extremely quickly and very, very suddenly. I could not stop. And I slammed right into the back of the car. I fell off on the ground.

I was dazed. The forks of my motorcycle were twisted. The tank was absolutely bashed. I lay on the road, twitching. The man came out of the car.

He stood over me. And he said one thing. Always expect the unexpected. Two things struck me. Number one, you're not very sympathetic.

That's all you can say after almost having killed me. But number two, some lessons and profound lessons are learned very quickly. Always expect the unexpected.

Now, I suppose the great thing is that tonight I know hardly any of you. I know hardly any of you. I don't know your story. I don't know your circumstance. And thankfully, you don't know mine.

[2 : 26] What's going to happen tonight? Well, I suppose it could easily be explained. On the one hand, here we are sitting in a very beautiful but really simple church on an island off the northwest of Scotland.

And I suppose that the outside observer will say that this is a very ordinary situation. It really isn't very unusual. In fact, to some folk, it's really rather quaint.

We have the media present tonight. And here again, we have this picture of this lovely, quaint little Western island where these quaint little people live. That's what people out there think of us and what we believe.

We're rather cute. We belong to a museum. Our language is novel. The way we worship is unusual, intriguing. Some folk find it attractive.

But at the end of the day, here we are, just harmless antiquities. And so it is. Perhaps many of us have come into church here. And what is it?

[3 : 28] Sunday night of the Stornway Communion. Sunday night. And it's like every other night. But really, always expect the unexpected. I wonder, is there someone here and tonight?

I don't know who you are. Your life's going to change. And maybe even, and this is a really exciting thing. Just now you don't know it.

And the really, really exciting thing is that just now you don't really want it to change. In fact, even as I speak, you are beginning, you are descent into a little bit of a sleep.

But always expect the unexpected. You see, all is not what it seems. Because, you know, God is at work amongst us.

And we may not appear on the outside to be the most supernaturally aware people on the face of the earth. But we believe that God is present.

[4 : 37] And that where God is present, supernatural things happen. And you know that something could happen tonight, which is more remarkable than even the creation of the universe.

Because the conversion of someone is a greater miracle than the creation of the universe. It was easy for God to create the universe.

That's what he does. He can create out of nothing this wonderful world and all the other worlds. That is easy for him to do. He is God.

But with us, well, I'm not saying it's difficult because nothing is difficult to God. But with us, he doesn't have a blank sheet of paper. He doesn't have nothing. He has men and women and boys and girls who are, frankly, somewhat perverse.

Well, this passage tonight takes us right to the Lord Jesus Christ. And it's a passage which really has got everything in it. We see the Lord Jesus Christ here portrayed. On the one hand, he's a hate figure.

[5 : 45] All these people want him dead. And indeed, they're being very successful with crucifying him. And yet, on the other hand, we have him portrayed here as Messiah. We see him as a king.

He is ushering people into the kingdom, isn't he? We see him here as a prophet. He is someone who tells the truth, what prophets do. And he is someone here also who is a priest.

He is dying in the place of his people. Priest sacrifice. But this priest is unusual because not only does he sacrifice, he is actually the sacrifice.

What else do we see? We see the nature of man. That man is depraved. Man is not just a nice person. Man is fundamentally at the core of his being a depraved individual.

You say, well, that's a bit harsh, isn't it? You ever read *Lord of the Flies*, a young folk at school? It's been a standard textbook for the last 50 years.

[6 : 45] How these innocent little children went on that island and how they tore one another to bits. Remember that unusual story in the news a few months ago?

That nice, respectable bank clerk who was coming along and remember what she did? She grabbed the cat. She put it in a wheelie bin. That's a funny little story that appears on YouTube. But what does it show? It shows that sometimes nice, respectable ladies put cats in bins. In other words, at whatever we are outwardly, when nobody is looking, we can be capable of the most horrendous, awful things.

Cats certainly know that human beings are depraved, that we don't. And so here we are tonight. We've come along to church and always expect the unexpected.

God is speaking, even now, to a few people. We come to one of the seven sayings of the cross.

[7 : 51] That's been our material for the last few days. And we come to one of the most famous sayings. It's actually the second saying of the cross. Let me sketch in the background.

There are three crosses on the hill that day. You all know that. There is the Lord Jesus Christ in the middle. And on either side, there are two criminals. They're not actually standard criminals.

They're quite unusual characters. The Greek word is very, very rare. It could mean bandit. But in the context, it means more a sort of political prisoner. They were kind of terrorists.

Terrorists for what they thought was a noble cause. They were actually religious terrorists. They thought that they were going to inaugurate the kingdom of heaven. They thought that by their terrorist activities, that they were going to speed along the terrorist aims of their own day.

They were zealots. And even like today, as a nation of Israel produces, and the Middle East produces very extreme people, so too on that day.

[8 : 56] It's a context of mocking. They're all mocking. You notice there's a mocking of diminishing status as you go through the chapter. The high hedions, the religious establishment, they are mocking Jesus.

27, 44, the Roman soldiers are mocking Jesus. And now the criminals are mocking Jesus. Just one note again by introduction. Jesus is here amongst the lowest of the low.

That's what he does. In life, he's amongst the lowest of the low. Do you notice the people that Jesus associated with in life? He associated with, let's name them, they were prostitutes.

They were immoral people. They were folk who drunk far too much. They were people who were of dubious characters. They were folk who had criminal records.

They were folk who, if they did not change their time, were going to spend serious time in prison. Jesus loved to mix and mingle with those people who were really at the absolute end of the moral maze.

[10 : 04] And here we have that these folk who were outside the mainstream are beginning to mock him. But yet, here he is, he's displaying his power.

And if Jesus Christ displayed his power when he was at the low point in his life, how much will he display his power tonight? When he is reigning in glory, when he is king of kings and lord of lords,

how much more will he come in his majesty and change our lines?

But through the mists, two groups emerge. We know who they are. They are the haters. And I suppose tonight, if one were not being too cruel, there may be haters here.

Now, don't get me wrong. You look a very respectable bunch of people, and I'm sure that no one would say consciously that they were God-haters.

Haters, and I'm sure that folk would be offended. But at the end of the day, there are many here in the church who will hear what we have to say and dismiss it.

[11 : 16] So we have the two groups. One group are the haters. The other group are the lovers, those people who loved the Lord Jesus Christ. We have the woman who wept for him.

Interesting, isn't it? Here's another bit of homework for you. Can you find any woman in the New Testament who were not favorable towards Jesus?

You can think of some nasty characters in the Old Testament. Jezebel, she was a right one. But in the New Testament, can you find any woman who were not favorably disposed towards Jesus?

Now, that's not saying that women are less depraved than men. But I wonder, in this congregation tonight, are there some women who are favorably disposed towards the Lord Jesus Christ?

But, yeah, that's all it is. They like his values. They like his ideas. They like his story to a certain extent. But, no, they will not have this man to rule over them.

[12 : 21] Step back and look at the scene. They didn't realize that there was a superpower at work.

And so it is, again, I say it again, there is tonight a superpower at work. There is God who is speaking to the most reluctant, cynical person.

You can hide, but thank God you can't run. Let's look at the passage. I think we noticed three things. What's all about this story about being a Christian?

Well, let's look at it and we'll notice, as I said, three things. Number one, the simplicity of salvation. The simplicity of salvation.

Tonight is about death. I'm not going to teach you how to die because we're all quite good at that. We don't really need to be taught how to die. We will all die. That's the story.

[13 : 29] But tonight we're going to teach us how to get to heaven. The simplicity of salvation. How is it a man or woman can be right with God?

I think I noticed four things in the simplicity. Number one, it all begins with a mess. We see it in the passage, don't we?

It really did happen so quickly that the two robbers on either side, one was as bad as the other at the beginning of the story because they are both mocking Jesus.

Both of them are happy. And what are they saying? They're saying he saved others, but he cannot save himself. If he comes down from the cross, then we will believe him. I guess even there are folk tonight who said similar things to Jesus, who at a time in their life said, if he was God, he would not allow that to happen.

If he was really God, he would not have allowed my child to die. If he really was God, he would not have taken my husband from me. If he really was God, my business wouldn't have failed. If he really was God, my marriage would be better than it really is.

[14 : 35] If he is Christ, how can he not do something in my life? How can he not intervene? Now, that's you. That's your story. It begins with a mess. You really cannot imagine a worse religious situation.

We're not talking here about lilo or medalists who've won a medal because they memorized the Shorter Catechism. You're talking here about raw, naked hatred for God.

Raw, violent, almost atheism. And so here we are, the impossibility of a situation. The two dying thieves, their past was horrendous. It was full of criminality and violence.

Their present circumstances, well, what could they do? They had no talents. They had no money. One writer says this of the dying thief.

He could not walk in the paths of righteousness because there was a nail through either foot. He could not perform any acts of righteousness because there was a nail through either hand.

[15 : 41] He could not turn over a new leaf and live a better life for he was dying. And this is the point. Salvation doesn't just begin with a mess.

Salvation needs a mess. There are some folk in this town, in this building, who are not Christians because, not because of their badness, but because of their goodness.

See, irony. Folk are lost, not because of, or just because of, damnable sin, if you like, but they're lost because of damnable goodness.

You're nice. You're good. You are not messed up. You are together. You keep lists. Your kitchen surfaces are clean.

Your kitchen surfaces are clean. Your ties are straight. Your shirts are white. Your lives are ordered. Everything in your life is fine.

[16:56] There doesn't seem to be a mess. But you see, the thing is, it begins with a mess, because he sees the mess.

He says, doesn't he? We, verse 41, and we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our sins. It begins with a mess.

And you know, we're in a bigger mess than we think. Consider that. It's a paradigm shift. But is it our goodness? Is it the fact that, really, our lives are so together that we're not trying, and then God save me.

Wipe the sin away. The simplicity of salvation begins with a mess. The simplicity of salvation, secondly, trusts on facts.

This is not a fairy story. This happened. It doesn't say once upon a time. What is truly I say to you? The dying thief.

[18:04] What facts did he rest on? Well, he observed the calmness. This is a man, Jesus Christ, who has been crucified, and he observed his calmness. He heard the prayer.

Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. He's heard the suggestion. He is the Messiah. At least he thinks he is the chosen one of God.

But he gets it. This is a feature of Luke's gospel. A feature of Luke's gospel is that the marginalized kind of get it.

They get it. But those who are in the periphery don't get it. You know, those folk who are religious and those folk who are respectable sometimes just don't get it.

I preached my first sermon at my own congregation, I don't know, 28 years ago. And the sermon was about how you cannot save yourself.

[19:09] How, you know, we are incapable of moral good. How we're paralyzed by our own sin and depravity. How we cannot ever say that we do our best.

The lady on the way out shook my hand and said, Great sermon. As long as we just do our best.

That's it, isn't it? you're kind of in a watch my lips scenario and yet even tonight many folk just don't get it but it's based on facts we know who he is we see who Jesus is that he is the holy one of God and it really is very simple the dying thief never had communion the dying thief was not baptized the dying thief had no church service that he ever went to now I'm not saying that these things are bad you know me well enough to know that of course not these are unusual circumstances but he realizes the facts what are the facts of Jesus we speak today about being counterintuitive and that means that the things that we think are going to bring us happiness in life will not do that and so we find here that yes it's simple begins with a mess it trusts in facts thirdly it's developed by fear notice what he's saying in verse 40 do you not fear God since you are under the same condemnation so to be saved we've got to see the mess we've got to see the facts of Jesus and we've got to fear now you know what fear is the fear of God is not the fear of hell and judgment now make no mistake there is hell and there is judgment of course there is we spoke of that this morning there is the awfulness of hell but don't just reduce God to being only that the fear of God is that but it's bigger than that what is the fear of God it's taking God seriously the fear of God does not drive us to terror we believers call him Abba we saw this morning we call him Father perfect love casts out fear there is hope but the fear of God is this that familiarity does not breed content

God cannot be tamed God cannot be reduced and that's what many of us have tried to do even those of us in the church who've tried to reduce God to systems we've tried to put God in a box we've tried to you know pack God into our own definitions we've tried to to tame God God will not be tamed he's Aslan he's the lion remember the famous account in the Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe where Mrs. Beaver hears about this enigmatic character called Aslan and she's asking what is he like and then she asks the question is he safe?

and the answer is no he's not safe but he's good beloved follow Christ walk in the wild side throw aside the straitjacket throw aside the conventions fall into his marvelous arms is he safe?

no is he good? yes and that's what the fear of God is the fear of God is seeing God as who he is he's magnificent he's huge he's large he's vast falling down before him dumbstruck filled with

wonder love and fear we've got this wow factor at who God is the fear of God salvation is simple isn't it?

[23 : 35] begins with a mess weans on facts developed by fear but fourthly it rests in faith look what he saw what did the dying thief see?

he saw a man upon a cross a bloody defeated dying man who said he was king never was anyone less kingly never did anyone look less like a king but he rested everything he rested everything on that king he was not afraid to go against the foe there was even peer pressure at the cross wasn't there?

as all these people he was the only one until the centurion they all mocked there was united opposition the riffraff as they were referred to were against him the establishment were against him they were all united in common cause the priests the custodians of religion at that time there was the tyranny of the mob saying don't follow him dare to be distant dare to be distant are we following the tyranny of everyone else?

what do people say about us? what do people say about our church? what do people say about is that why we're not being coming out as being Christians?

who does he think he is? salvation is by grace it's a very simple prayer remember me that's all that's required beloved remember me when you come into your kingdom simple remember Joseph in prison the chief butler remember me when you get out he interpreted the dreams did the chief butler remember him?

[25 : 54] no the simplicity of salvation the second thing we notice here is the suddenness of salvation the criminal the bandit the terrorist whatever you call him he came to faith immediately immediately immediately immediately what a transformation from a cross to a crown he came to Christ just like that and tonight you can you can come tonight maybe you've already come today at one point I gave a gospel offer this morning before we came to the Lord's table I said if you're converted just join us at the Lord's table the session can sort out the legal mess later I wonder was someone changed this morning and didn't walk the walk for one reason and I can sympathize with that reason fear fear not the done thing but see we have here the suddenness of salvation just two things about this suddenness simple number one a sudden salvation is possible not only is it possible it is a reality you remember that the conversation of Philip and the

Ethiopian unit you know the Ethiopian unit is going along in his chariot and he's reading from Isaiah chapter 53 and Philip says do you know what you're talking about do you understand what you're reading and the guy says no how can I there's nobody here to explain it and Philip goes alongside him and explains it it's talking about Jesus and the Ethiopian unit gets it and remember what they say what does prevent me from being baptized and Philip says nothing let's do it now not only is a sudden salvation possible a sudden salvation is not just desirable is tomorrow promised now statistically I'm not medically trained but statistically and in the natural sphere of things you all ought to be alive tomorrow morning

I've not done a detailed analysis of the complexion and pulse of everybody in this building but most of you anyway look alive but is statistically we'll probably survive till the morning but is tomorrow promised that's another story again the great thing is I'm a visitor here I'm God willing off in the ferry at 7 o'clock in the morning it's not all that important what I say life will go on but is there someone here tonight who's not been here for a long time I don't know and just came I don't know why you've come I don't know why you're here why have you not been for a long time is there someone here and I you know I believe there is and you know what your story is I'll tell you exactly what your story is your story is that there was a time in your life in this very building do you remember it it wasn't a communion

Sunday night it was another night and someone leant over this pulpit and pleaded with you to come to Christ and something happened that night didn't it you know who you are and that night you resolved to make your peace with God and come to Christ but you didn't and you have not experienced a prompting like that since until now you're a little bit frightened because you're saying that guy knows my story you know what you have to do you have to come to Christ now this night why because his opportunity may never come again this is not manipulated you know who you are so sudden salvation is possible but listen to this this second point is important a sudden conversion is unusual there's a famous quote again it's one of those quotes that's quoted in most sermons on the dying thief one was saved upon the cross that none might despair and only one that none might presume now is the accepted time and now is the day of salvation maybe a wee question for further

discussion was the other thief saved well

I don't know the assumption of the poor man was that he wasn't that he was lost I don't know the Bible doesn't say but a sudden salvation is unusual because at this point there's another preacher wants to get into the pulpit you see there's another preacher here tonight and he's attempting to climb the pulpit steps and he wants to preach a sermon indeed he's begun to preach and his preaching is in parallel with my preaching can you hear him do you know what he's saying well first of all I'll give you his name he is the reverend devil and can you hear his sermon can you hear what he is saying he is saying delay delay delay that guy's a scaremonger that guy is only trying to frighten you that guy is using some sort of oratorical device to frighten the wits out don't don't don't listen to him do you hear his voice simplicity of salvation suddenness of salvation now thirdly the security of salvation it's a lovely picture the security of salvation the very first recruit the first inhabitant to heaven after the crucifixion wonderful can you imagine can you imagine it in heaven the prophets are there the apostles are there and there's

[34 : 30] Rahab there's Mary Magdalene David Peter Manasseh Saul of Tarsus can you imagine them and then in heaven there's a loud noise who is this now oh it's the dying thief come on in the criminal says Lord remember me when you come into your kingdom little did he know that the kingdom began right then in a sense he was not brought into heaven but heaven was brought to him at that very point when he said Jesus remember me and that's what you have to say I was doing an evangelistic thing in our own church December just before Christmas packed full of community people the community folk were packed into the hall we're having a pre

Christmas event and I'm telling them the gospel and one of my elders whispers to me tell them what to do tell them what to do and beloved tonight you've got to do something you've got to speak to God and say Lord remember me forgive me have mercy to me a sinner that's what you do at that point forgiveness hope flooded in the vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives and pardon see what we're saying the security of salvation because pardon leads to paradise truly truly I say to you today you will be with me in paradise the word paradise means a garden takes us back to

Eden the idea of beauty enjoyment plenty what what about death it's been said that death is a new obsanity people talk about all sorts of things today apart from death the dying thief however says Lord tonight remember me Jesus said today you will be with me in power J.C.

Ryle said this verse contains a whole body of divinity like many of you not all of you I learnt the shorter catechism well a rephrase that I was supposed to learn the shorter catechism I really wasn't very good at it but it's another story but my favourite catechism there's no doubt what my favourite catechism is question 37 what benefits do believers receive at Christ's death the souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness and do immediately pass into glory their bodies being still united to

Christ to rest in the grave until the resurrection that question will answer 50 other questions things what are we talking about tonight we're talking about your eternal and my eternal salvation all who die in Christ immediately pass unto glory why?

[38 : 51] because heaven is prepared for them because at death they are ready for heaven and because Christ longs for them I wonder tonight are we frankly going to be saved?

always expect the unexpected can I invite you to come to Christ?

the dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day and there have I though vile as he washed all my sins away we are not perfect people in the church if you say I'm not going to join that church that's full of hypocrites we can always do with one more none of us pretend to be what we're not but tonight will you come?

because this is a really, really, really fun thing I can invite you to come to Christ I can appeal to you to come to Christ but he is already at work in your lives and he's already changing you irresistibly beautifully bringing you into himself will we hear or will heaven hear the sound of rejoicing tonight that several of you unexpectedly the most unlikely of you the most cynical of you saved saved let's bow our heads as we pray

Father you are the God of the unexpected you are the God who does all things well speak with us tonight change us and Lord these people who heard the gospel many years ago and didn't respond and who are hearing it again tonight you know who they are may they be changed even now forgive us our sins Amen