

The Thief on the Cross

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[0 : 00] Let's turn again to the chapter we read, chapter 23 of the Gospel of Luke, and read again at verse 42.

This is the word, and I'm sure these are words that are well known to most, if not all of you here this evening. It's the story of the two men who were on the, who kneeled on separate crosses, one on either side of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, as he poured out his soul to death.

You're remembering there, too, as we were pointing out this morning, so often details of these events were forecast, prophesied by the prophets of old in the Old Testament.

And this is one of these, where Isaiah said he made his grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death.

And here he is coming to die between two common thieves. And the interesting thing, of course, there are many interesting facts around this, but it's the words that we have for our text this evening that I want us just to reflect on for a little.

[1 : 25] They're interesting words because they're the words that make an appeal by one of these thieves, one of these criminals, to Jesus. And, of course, in the interest, in the desire of this man, there's clearly an interest that has been stirred, awakened, aroused.

And that interest is focused on Jesus. And that interest is worded in the request that he makes to Jesus. And in many ways, it's beautiful in his simplicity because he simply says, verse 42, he said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

I suppose that if I was to say to you tonight, or if you said to me, I don't know what to say as I search and seek out what life is about and what Jesus is about and how I find Jesus.

Here is an answer, perhaps, to that question. It's a very simple answer. It's a very simple question. And the answer is even more beautiful and more profound.

This question, of course, or the request is simply, remember me. So if you're looking for a way of finding your path towards Jesus of Nazareth, here is a, I suppose you could break it down simply to a couple of words, two words perhaps, two words perhaps, in fact, or three words, Jesus, remember me.

[3 : 06] I want us just for a moment to go back to look at this because, to my mind at least, it's a fascinating drama that's played out here.

It's a reality more than a drama. It's concerning three men, two of them thieves and the other one innocent and yet being found guilty by the Jews.

And, of course, we saw this morning the consequences of that and what they themselves said, his blood be on us and on our children. And, you know, when I read these words, even to this day, you can't help but think of how the Jews have been so much scattered in so many different parts of the world.

That's another story. But it's interesting because you're seeing the dynamics, as it were, of these two characters. You're seeing the way in which they deal with Jesus.

And I raise that because I want to search in our own hearts tonight, in your heart and in my own, the manner of our dealing with Jesus.

[4 : 19] The way in which Jesus, or does Jesus in any way, shape or form, play a part in my life and in your life? Now, you might say right away, no, he doesn't.

And really, at this moment in time, I don't want him to. Perhaps some of you here tonight are completely self-sufficient, completely dependent and independent of anything and everything.

And you think yourself, well made and well thought of and all these elements. But it's more than that that is required when we look into the Bible.

It's more than that that's required of us. And as you look at these two chaps, these two fellows, these two criminals, you'll see the different ways in which they handled these moments as they themselves were nailed to crosses, one on either side of Jesus.

And how they, I suppose, in a sense, engaged, like some of the crowd did at that time, how they engaged with Jesus.

[5 : 29] And how that engagement with Jesus worked out for the two of them. You see, when we engage with Jesus, we're surely looking for some kind of response to that engagement.

You know, at a human level, at a natural level, if I engaged with you, I would expect a response. And it's the same here.

They engage with Jesus and they expect a response. But it's the nature of their engagement and even the tone of their engagement that is so interesting and so different in the latter part of this engagement.

Now, we have to remember that in another Gospel of Chronicles, in Mark, that both of these criminals had to, for want of a better expression, had a real go at Jesus.

And all they're interested in is saving their skin, to put it bluntly. They're interested in getting down from the cross.

[6 : 41] They're interested in getting freed. They're interested, ultimately, in getting off with the crimes that they were guilty of.

And that could not be. And that would not be. And so, it is, as you look at these, that you see something of the diverse nature of them in that place.

The other thing, and this has been spoken of by others at different times, is that it's probably the last place you would have thought that people would gather and would, as they were nailed to their crosses, begin to speak to Jesus.

And how it is, ultimately, and this is what is so astonishing, that here we're seeing the sovereign purposes of God being worked out, being played out, not just in the life of our Lord, but in the life of these two criminals.

Amazing how God works. And how he brings situations, he brings sometimes you and I into situations where we never thought that perhaps there would be any necessity of calling upon God.

[8 : 00] And yet, he also brings us into situations where, when we begin to analyze them, we can become angry with God.

We can become even confused about why is God working like this. Now, these men were unbelievers. They were not believing at that point.

And one of them would go to hell, unbelieving. And the other one would go to heaven, having believed. And you know, that is the reality of it. Let's just cut to the point.

And that is the reality of it for all of us here tonight. If we believe, if we believe as one of these did, then we will go to heaven.

If we don't believe, as the other one didn't, or we have no record, no further record of him coming to believe, and we assume where scripture is silent, often that is the case.

[9 : 01] And he, as a consequence of that, went to hell. He went to a lost eternity. He didn't go to paradise. He went to the opposite, whatever definition or name we want to give to that.

And I want to say that because there's so much confusion going on. But you know, when you come back to the gospel, when you come back to God's word, when you begin to search through, there's amazing twists and turns that sometimes we can relate to.

And we can say, I can follow that. And sometimes we're surprised that the Bible gives us this information whereby we can follow him. And as he does that, so you and I are invited to, not just to follow the teaching as well, but to follow the person Jesus.

This Jesus is the savior of sinners. So there's three men there. One is the savior of the world. He's sinless. And the other two are sinners.

And as you look at them, so you will see the way in which this whole narrative develops. As we said, they're here according to the sovereign purposes of God.

[10 : 21] And yet they're here for a purpose. I wonder if you think you're here tonight for a purpose.

Not just because perhaps some of you are dragged along. But that God in his sovereign purpose has allowed you to be here tonight.

Not to hear me. But to hear the word of God being read. The word of God being sung. The word of God being spoken about.

And for you perhaps to develop some kind of insight as to all of these things. Let's look at just, I said a moment ago, the gospel of Mark tells us that they both, as we say, had a go at Jesus.

And in this account too, we have the same thing. Verse 39. Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us. You know, he's not really interested in Jesus saving himself.

[11:34] He's interested in escaping and getting out of the awfulness of the death that he would suffer. We know that crucifixion was a fearful way of death.

There would sometimes be left there nailed to a cross for days. You know that in this situation, because it was coming to the Sabbath, that they broke the legs of the thieves.

This hastened their death. They could no longer push themselves upward to catch their breath. And they would die. And we know too, that this wasn't done to Jesus, because he was already done.

He was already dead. And they're surprised at all of these things. But you see again, even in these, there is the fulfilling of the word he said himself.

I have power to lay down my life. And I have power to take it again. So again and again, we're seeing, even in the midst of all of these awful situations, we're seeing the sovereign hand of God.

[12:50] So one of them is saying, get us out of this mess. You know, I suspect that perhaps there are some of you in here tonight who have been in a tight spot.

I remember speaking to someone once. And they said to me, and they admitted it very openly. I thought my number was up. They were at sea. And they called out.

They prayed. They openly admitted to me that they had prayed. And God had saved them physically. The spiritual is another matter.

So you're seeing here, here is a man that just wants to get off the hook. And in fact, they both are at it for a moment or two. And I suspect, as I say, there may be some of you here tonight.

And you actually began to believe that there was a God. And you actually believed that perhaps if you asked him, he would help you out of this spot.

[13:56] And you know what? You got out of this spot. But you know, I suspect that many of you, if you were in that situation, didn't continue with that practice.

You let it go. And perhaps if you're honest, you've never really admitted that you prayed to God. And yet here you are tonight, as I said a moment ago, under God's sovereign hand.

He brings you to his house. And he allows you this further opportunity of perhaps even using the prayer of a thief so that God would indeed show you mercy at a spiritual level.

And so here it is. And then the whole dynamic changes. And I don't know if you've ever wondered, but I've often wondered, what were the elements that caused this other man to change his whole view and his whole petition?

And interesting too, before he actually comes to speak to Jesus, he actually turns to his colleague in crime, if he was that.

[15:27] And he says, do you not fear God? Who would ever think that amongst all the rubble that was taking place, the noise, the awfulness of crucifixion, that one would hear these words?

One criminal addressing another. Do you not fear God? I wonder where he had learned, how he had begun to think of what it was to fear God.

Now we know that the Bible tells us this, and we know that we spoke sometime over this weekend about Elijah being in fear. But that's another element.

But here are two men who, so far as we can make out, were completely Godless. And I was thinking perhaps it's so, and this is a line that's taken by some writers.

And it's interesting because there must have been something. Of course, we know that the Spirit of God could be working there. That's obvious. And yet there must be some dynamic that makes him say, do you not fear God?

[16:40] And it's showing us something of his own condition at a spiritual level.

It's showing us something of how it is that perhaps a soul begins to search and to seek. Now it's not just a carnal fear like we were talking about the other night about the fear of being in a storm.

We used an illustration. And it's not that at all. Here is something that is a constituent element of what it is to become a believer.

Because the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, we're told. And here we're seeing something of that. Here we're seeing a man found guilty.

And he's saying to his mate, look, you've got to get a handle on this. Do you not fear God? Do you not see that this is our situation?

[17 : 46] Do you not fear God? Since you are under the same sentence of condemnation. They were both under condemnation. And there's a sense, of course, in which he's pulling Christ into it.

And yet, you wonder too if he's listened and heard. What's the reaction of this man, this Jesus, this innocent man and yet sin-bearing man?

Has he watched his demeanor? Has he watched and has he listened? Father, forgive them. Has he watched and listened as all these other elements that related to the sayings of the cross as they were poured out from him?

Some of them already, others to follow. And perhaps in all of these, there's something that influences his thinking. And, you know, that's what the Bible does as we allow it to filter through into our hearts and minds.

It influences the way we think. It influences the way we talk. It influences the way we live. It's an influence for good.

[19 : 04] And, of course, if the fear of the Lord is there, if there's that reverence for him, that awesome awareness of who God is, if that is there, then it makes all the difference to us.

So that's one of the things that we have to note here. And then he makes an admission. He says, we're simply getting what our crimes deserve.

But he says something else that is even more startling, which makes us wonder, where is he getting this theology from? And he says to his mate, this man, and he's referring to Jesus, this man, he says, has done nothing wrong.

Isn't that amazing? Now, we need to pause here because this is highly significant as we look into the way in which we search for Jesus.

To see that this Jesus, whose death we remembered here today, as we remembered his death, we were saying, he bore my sin in his own body on a tree.

[20 : 21] And yet, he was innocent. The innocent taking the guilt. The innocent taking the punishment.

The innocent taking the condemnation. And that's, you see, how Jesus can be and is willing to be your savior.

And that's why you can say to him tonight, remember me. Have mercy on me. Reveal yourself to me. How, you see?

Because he is the sin bearer who carries the punishment that your sin and my sin deserves. And he carries it on the tree, on the cross.

And as a consequence of that, we have access to him. We have a way to him through what he has done.

[21 : 21] As a result of what he has done. And he says this. He makes no bones about it. We indeed justly. But this man has done nothing wrong.

As conscience is awakened. It's good to have conscience awakened, isn't it? I suspect some of you here tonight don't like when your conscience is rattled, when your conscience is wakened.

It leaves you feeling uncomfortable. It leaves you restless. Doesn't it? Why do you think your conscience is wakened?

Why do you think the gospel sometimes, and you allow me to use the word I get, wattles you, why does the gospel do that?

I suppose most of you know why. Because it's making claims on your life. It's making claims on your life.

[22 : 36] And I know too that we can become very adept at snuffing out the voice of conscience. We can go home.

Yes, even before we go home. We can have snuffed out the voice of conscience. Through some means or other.

And it's gone. And the message is gone. And the thought of God is gone. And the thought of your condition as a lost sinner going to hell is gone.

And yet here he is. His conscience is awakened. And what does he know? He knows that before God, he is condemned.

I wonder if you've really thought it that way. If you've thought it through that, as you are, let's just start again here.

[23 : 49] Let me just say, there are two groups of people in here tonight. There are those who are believers. Now that can take all kinds of forms in a sense.

But I'm using the term believer to relate to a person who believes that Jesus of Nazareth is his or her savior. I'm not asking if you're a member, or if you're sat at his table today.

I would say, that if you believe that Jesus of Christ of Nazareth is your savior, then you should be in membership. And you should be sitting at his table. And you do him a disservice by neglecting that duty.

So there are two groups of people in here tonight. There are those who believe. And there are those who do not believe. Now I realize too that this causes all kinds of protests, I suppose. Perhaps you're even protesting in your seats. And you're saying, well, I do believe. I believe that the Bible is true. You know, the devils believe and tremble. The devils believe and tremble.

[24 : 58] It's not just a vision. Oh, I know the Bible is God's word. It's a great starting point. But you know, the important thing is this. To know that I am no more condemned.

Now you see, if you haven't got Jesus, you can know this story as well as I know it. And perhaps even better, all the references to it. Perhaps it's something that fascinates you, this story. And you can know all of that.

But unless you have, ask Jesus to have mercy on you. And you know, he has answered your prayer. You're lost. You are without God and without hope in the world.

That's the reality of it. And I wish, perhaps, above all else, that you would grasp that. That you are lost without Jesus as your friend and as your saviour.

And I labour that point because this is the point to which criminal, we want to call him that, has come to. He sees his own lostness.

[26 : 11] He sees his own hopelessness. He sees the darkness of everlasting punishment before. I sometimes think that perhaps he had been brought up to know even something of the Old Testament.

He may have been a Jew. I don't know. But it's interesting the way his mind goes and how he analyses the whole of this scene.

And so he says, we indeed justly, this man has done nothing wrong. We receive the due reward for our deeds.

But this man has done nothing wrong. So here is the key to our salvation, as it were. From the biblical side, it is that this Jesus who dies as a sin bearer, who dies on a cross outside the city of Jerusalem.

He is there condemned like a common criminal, like these guys were. And yet, he is innocent.

[27 : 24] He is sinless, but a sin bearer. And notice the difference, the distinction between these two. Sinless and yet sin bearing.

And because he has done that, this man can turn to him and say, and notice, isn't it so personal? He doesn't say, you fellow there and beside me.

He names him by his name. Thou shalt call his name Jesus. He will save his people from their sin. And what does he say? Ah, he says, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Remember me. It's very personal, as we say.

And you know what else is so, so important in this, in these three words? not just that it's personal, but it is spoken to Jesus.

[28 : 35] It's spoken to Jesus. And you know, if you're really searching and seeking and have a longing in your heart tonight to know Jesus, speak to him in that personal kind of way.

make known to him your own awareness of the fact that without him you are condemned eternally. But with him, you will be with him and your soul will soar to paradise.

To be with Christ is far better. It's interesting too because the other man I'm sure is as we're lugging into all of this.

You know, that's what's sometimes so amazing it's not amazing, it's not the right word, it's so solemn about this gospel is that one person can make this their prayer tonight and another will say not tonight.

I've too much on. I've too much on. Is that wise?

[29 : 56] Is that you really being serious? That you've got so much going on in your life that you know time for Jesus.

And one of them chooses Jesus, one of them speaks to Jesus, and Jesus hears, and Jesus answers. And one doesn't.

And Jesus just doesn't answer. And he goes to a lost eternity. And it's sometimes like that within the walls of these buildings, this building.

One hears, it becomes a savor of life. One hears, becomes a savor of death. The same message. the same chapter, the same text. One accepts, and one rejects.

[31 : 05] What will it be for you tonight? tonight? What will it be for you tonight? Let's just briefly look at the answer, and then we'll finish.

Remember me. Interesting to see you. How did he know he had a kingdom? How does he know this Jesus has a kingdom?

That's why I say there must have been some background knowledge. Of course, he was seeing him, and he was hearing the mocking of the soldiers of the Jews. You said you were the king of the Jews, and the superscription above his head said the king of the Jews.

When there's a king, there's inevitably a kingdom. But I think there's much more than that in it. And you think about it. Those of you who have exercised in that, you think about what that exactly might mean.

But it's the response that I want to finish with. First of all, let's ask ourselves, does Jesus actually hear this man?

[32 : 16] Is Jesus sufficiently interested in this man's condition, in this man's case, in this man's situation, to give him time?

And you think about it. The agony that our Lord was going through at this point. The awfulness of what it was that he was bearing.

The pain, the suffering, the anguish, the weakness, and yet he's able in these moments to say, today, truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.

Does he hear? Yes. As he interested? Yes. Does he answer? Yes. I say that because that is the kind of Jesus he is.

That is the kind of Savior he is. He's a Savior who has an interest in you, who knows you, as we were saying in our opening psalm. You search me, you know me, you know my rising up, you know my sitting down, you're familiar with all my ways.

[33 : 32] so does he have an interest in this man? Ah, yes, he has. Here is the man of whom the prophet spoke, whose visage was so marred than that of others.

And this poor lost sinner, on the brink of lostness, is snatched as a brand from the burning, and will in a few hours be elevated to the paradise of God.

Why and how? Because he asked. It's as simple as that. He asked.

So will you ask? Will you put off your facade that you wear? will you put off all your excuses?

Will you ask Jesus to have mercy on your soul? And as surely as he had mercy on this man, so he will have mercy on all who call upon him.

[34 : 48] Isn't it amazing that that man that morning probably had, if he had a breakfast, he had it with a criminal. and he would sup in paradise with Jesus before the day was out.

And the other, he goes to lostness. Are you going to be one of the others tonight?

some of you have heard this gospel over many days and years.

Some of you sadly and solemnly perhaps have become hardened under it and it no longer affects you.

May the Lord have mercy on your soul. And others of you perhaps, as I said a moment ago, still searching, still seeking, and is here for you tonight.

[36 : 10] Will you not lay hold upon him? Will you not use the prayer of this common thief who died beside the savior of sinners and who cried out in his anguish and in his agony, Lord remember me?

And the Lord answered, today you will be with me in paradise. Our Lord was there before him.

And we believe he was there soon after. the first of his, I suppose, of his humiliation converts, born again in the very face of the death of our Lord.

It's the wonder of the gospel. Will you not come? Why would you let him pass by tonight again?

Come and you will live.

the alternative I even find difficult to speak about. But he lays out a line for us.

[37 : 47] It's by us unseen, as the word of the verse says. There is a line by us unseen that crosses every path.

the hidden mystery between God's mercy and God's wrath. Let's pray.

Let's pray. you alone give the increase.

You are the great and merciful Savior. you. And we pray that even this evening you will show mercy and show favor to lost souls.

In your name we pray. Amen. Let's conclude our service this evening singing in Psalm 33 from verse 17 page 246.

[39 : 03] An horse for preservation is a deceitful thing and by the greatness of his strength can no deliverance be ring. Behold on those that do him fear the Lord doth set his eye even those who on his mercy do with confidence rely.

From verse 17 let's stand to sing. An horse for preservation is is done there among many men And so, of his strength, can no deliverance bring.

Behold on those that could interfere, the Lord doth set his eye.

In those who all his mercy do, with confidence rely.

From death to free, their soul in death lie unto them to heal.

[40 : 51] Our soul that we upon the Lord, gives our help and shield.

Saith in his holy name we trust, our hearts shall joyful be.

Lord, let thy mercy be on us, as we do in thee.

Amen.