

A Dying Criminal Converted

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Date: 05 June 2016

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[0 : 00] Let's turn to Luke chapter 23 and at verse 39, we'll look at verses 39 to 43. Luke 23 at verse 39, 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, our Lord, 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. Now we've looked for a number of weeks at some of the accounts we have in the Bible of people's conversions, or they're coming to know the Lord and different aspects of that, whether it was faith or repentance, that was to the fore in these various passages, some from the Old Testament as well as from the New. And it seems appropriate this evening as we would continue with that study, that we would come to this particular account we have of the conversion of this criminal who was crucified alongside of Jesus.

We looked this morning at the death of Jesus. We remembered the death of Jesus in the Lord's Supper. And we heard about certain aspects of that from the letter to the Hebrews and chapter 13. [1 : 38] That was the central cross, the middle cross, out of those three crosses that were situated there in that particular place on that solemn occasion.

But we also have this other cross. There were three crosses altogether. And we'll look later at one of the points that the Gospels make, that Jesus was actually crucified in the middle with one of the thieves on each side of him.

And as we come to that, we'll see something of the significance of that. But as we looked at the central cross this morning, so we're looking at this one this evening, where we find an account here of the conversion of this thief, of this criminal who was crucified along with Jesus.

Thomas Guthrie, one of the disruption leaders, tells of one occasion when he went to visit in one of the closes in Edinburgh, these terrible living conditions that people lived in.

And Guthrie would often visit these closes full of all kinds of diseases and people caught up with all kinds of addictions in those days, just as we find today, if not even worse in those days.

[3 : 02] But he tells that one woman that he went to visit, or one close, he went in there, and there was a woman lying on her deathbed. And as he went into that very small hobble, as he called it, there was actually a priest administering the last rites to the woman.

And so Guthrie stood in the doorway and waited till the priest had done his business. And then he went over to the woman and he spoke to her very simply about her need as a sinner and how Jesus was the Savior.

And he came to see her, placing her trust in Jesus, even as he spoke. And before he left that room, the woman had passed away.

And he refers to it like this, I saw, he said, a woman in three states in one day. A state of lostness, a state of being saved, and a state of glory as she left this world.

And that's what you find with this criminal on the cross. We find him, first of all, in a lost state, accusing Christ.

[4 : 22] We find him, secondly, in a saved state, accepting Christ. And we find him, thirdly, in a heavenly state, accompanying Christ.

Three states in one day, and in fact, briefly within that one day, in the space of these hours, however long they actually were, that these three crucified people lived before they died.

Here he is, first of all, we find him in a lost state, accusing Christ. Now, it's not Luke that tells us that, but if you turn to Matthew's account of it, you'll find very briefly there a reference in Matthew 27

and verse 44, that the criminals who were actually crucified along with Christ railed against him. In other words, that's an insight into where this man actually began the day and where he began the circumstances of his crucifixion alongside of the Lord. He didn't begin that experience and that circumstance as a saved man.

He began that as a lost man. He began that along with his companion in a state in which he accused Christ, in which he spoke against the Lord, in which he railed against him.

[5 : 43] It's clear that they both did that and that's why you find that his account here of the account of his conversion here is all the more remarkable in that sense at least. That he began along with his companion in accusing and finding fault with Jesus or in mocking Jesus, but before the day ended, he had come to accept the Lord and be assured that even before the day was out, he would actually be with the Lord in paradise.

And that's really a characteristic of our lostness, isn't it? It's something that we come to realize as the Lord brings home to us what it is has happened in the fall of man described in Genesis chapter 3.

That it has brought into our lives, into our consciousness, into our thinking, into our mind, into our conclusions, thoughts about God and thoughts about Jesus Christ that are in fact unworthy of him. That's how you find the fall in fact described in Eden. It was at the suggestion of the serpent, the serpent representing Satan, that doubt was placed in the word of God, in the veracity, the truthfulness of God, in the dependableness of God.

Yes, has God indeed said this? Has he not withheld something from you? Is it not unfair of him not to have given you absolutely every tree in the garden?

[7 : 19] That was the suggestion, the proposal, the temptation. God's first estate of innocence and holiness.

And all mankind following fell with him in that first transgression apart from Christ himself. and when God came to call him out from his hiding place, which of course he could never use as a hiding place from God, the question that God posed was, Adam, where are you?

And what a telling question that is because it's not simply a question as to the place where Adam was hiding because God knew very well. He was addressing Adam so that he would think in his own mind now fallen and hiding from God and afraid of God that he would think of what had happened in terms of where he was spiritually.

That he was no longer in friendship with God. That there was an enmity between him and God. That there was a hostility towards God. That there was an accusing of God because the first thing he said when God brought him out and brought him to give an account of what had happened. The woman you gave me. Is he passing the buck? It's natural to us as fallen sinners to find fault with somebody else. And here is a criminal, two criminals alongside of the Lord.

[8 : 57] And what are they doing to begin with? In the account the Gospels give us, they're railing against Christ. They're joining in with others who say, why can't you save us? Why don't you do something to change the situation for us?

And that's the cry you get today, isn't it? From so many people. Why does God not intervene? Why does God not put a stop to certain things? If he's God, does he not care?

And if he cares, why doesn't he come to stop some of the terrible things that are happening in the world? Well, you know something, if God was to intervene in all circumstances, in the lives of fallen sinners like you and I, we would also complain against that.

If God actually, in a way of some deterministic way, actually brought our mind just to come to a conclusion that he himself was pleased with and nothing else, you and I as fallen sinners would say, why don't you allow me to choose for myself?

And the many atheistic voices you'll find clamoring against God if he exists, as they say, why doesn't he intervene? These very people would say, if God intervened and actually brought them to think of things the way God would want them to think of it, they would find the same accusation, why doesn't God allow us freedom of choice.

[10 : 26] We want to live life by our own thoughts and by our own principles. And what all of that tells us is that fallen mankind will always find accusations against God of different kinds and different circumstances, but that's what's in our hearts.

And you know what this man was really doing was justifying himself or trying to justify himself. That's how he began along with this other man who kept on saying, here are you not the Christ,

save yourself and us.

Why don't you actually save us? Why don't you save yourself? And he's really trying to justify himself in such a way as would trying to be released from his circumstances.

And it's really quite a thought isn't it? That every time in our minds we say no to Christ's call in the gospel, we are actually setting out to justify ourselves.

When we're saying no to Christ in the gospel, we're really saying yes to our own view of life as an alternative to what God is setting before us. We are seeking to justify ourselves in the way that is determined to continue to live without God.

[11 : 58] Just as this man and his companion began that particular occasion on that day by finding fault with Jesus. Jesus. Now where does that leave yourself and myself tonight?

Am I tonight going to try and justify myself in resisting what God is saying to me in his word as to what I should do about my life, about my relationship with God?

Am I going to say no to Christ? And if I am, is that not saying I'm better qualified to look after my own life than to yield my life to you?

Where does it find yourself tonight? Are you harboring a thought in your heart that finds fault with God?

Are you trying to justify your situation without Christ by passing the bug back to God himself? Are you blaming somebody else?

[13 : 04] for a Christless life? It's nobody's fault but your own and mine if it's mine as well. You find him in a lost state accusing Christ.

But secondly, we come across him in a saved state accepting Christ. This man, he began, as we said, the same as his companion, but by this time, as we find recorded in Luke, he has changed or he's been changed.

Something's happened in this man's life to change his outlook, to change his view, to change his opinion of Jesus and indeed of himself. When his companion then goes on saying, are you not the Christ, save yourself and us?

Now he begins to rebuke his companion. And he says to his companion, 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.

We're not told much of the mechanics, if you like, of the change, but we're told enough so that we can see as we look into these words certain features of what it means to come to be converted, to know conversion, and to be a converted person.

[14 : 29] And there are three things especially he first of all knew. Three things that he knew. First of all, he knew himself. Notice what he's saying.

We indeed justly, for we are receiving the same sentence of condemnation. Isn't that really how you and I should see it as well?

Isn't what Christ suffered what we deserved? Isn't what we were remembering this morning in the Lord's Supper and in the accompanying preaching to do with the death of Jesus, the love of God in providing for us Jesus and his death and his resurrection, is that not really saying to us the same as this passage in Luke is saying to us?

we indeed justly ought to be where Christ was. It would have been right of God if he had actually placed us under his condemnation forever without any way of escape or without any way of release. peace. I remember very clearly if you allow me a personal reference sitting in the Free Church in Aberdeen many years ago now, not yet a communicant and having come to the service early.

[16 : 00] And as the preacher began to speak about the sufferings of Christ, I began to feel really bad about myself. I had begun feeling bad about myself anyway.

I had come to know my need as a sinner, but I still hadn't really got down to doing something crucial about it, something final about it. But this preaching, this emphasis of the sufferings of Christ really got through to my soul and I began to think, what is this?

Why am I feeling this way? And you know the conclusion I had to come to was this, because I am responsible. for what he suffered.

Because I am the cause in my sins, in my lostness of the way that Jesus had to suffer what he suffered and the death that he died, because that's the death that we deserved.

if you and I were cast tonight to hell, God came to us and said, that's what I have for you, that's your destiny.

[17 : 13] Would we complain against God and say, I don't deserve this? not if we really accept the Bible's view of ourselves. What we would have to say and acknowledge before God is, Lord, if you did that, it would be just of you.

It would be right of you to do this. It would be nothing less than I deserve. It would be what I would suffer justly for my deeds as a sinner against you.

And that's what this is reminding us. This man came to know himself. It's so important to come to know yourself, to know yourself in the light of the Bible, to accept what the Bible is saying about you, to accept what the Bible is saying when it says the worst about you, when it says that you are indeed this fallen, sinful human being that cannot justify yourself, that cannot find a place before God where you would say, I deserve your mercy, I deserve your salvation, I deserve to be released from the condemnation of my sin, from the sentence of the law.

No, you say with the other man in Luke chapter 18, in contrast to the Pharisee who stood beside him and praised God or thought he was praising God by giving a long list of all his virtues, I thank you Lord that I am not such and such and I am not even as this sinner.

that's a man who didn't know himself, was blind to the reality of what he was and his companion beat on his breast and said, Lord be merciful to me, the sinner.

[19 : 03] You see, there's a man who knew himself just as this man had come to know himself. He had come to know what he was and who he was in the presence of God and the presence of the Savior.

He knew that his condemnation was just if this was really going to be applied to him, that his sufferings were deserved. We are under the same sentence of condemnation.

But not only did he know himself, he also knew Christ. Christ. But this man has done nothing wrong. Here he is saying about himself to his companion, you know, we deserve all that we have here by way of our suffering and this crucifixion.

This is what we deserve. This is really the punishment that is just, that is just for what we've done. But this man has done nothing wrong. He sees his own guilt, he confesses his own guilt, but the person beside him, he says, is in a very different category.

He has done nothing wrong. He's not a sinner like I am, he's saying. He's not under this condemnation justly like I am, at least from the point of view of having done something himself that deserved it.

[20 : 26] Why then, on that middle cross, is the Son of God in our nature crucified? What's happening there?

If he didn't deserve it in himself, then why does he have to die? And why does he have to die this death that is nothing less than the penalty of sin and the pains of hell in his own soul?

Because there are two very important things going on there. Two big theological words, but they're so crucial for us to know substitution and mediation.

He is there as a substitute for his people. He is there taking their place. He is there standing where they rightly should stand in the condemnation of God and under the wrath of God.

That's him as a substitute, as 1 Peter puts it, chapter 3 and verse 18. He is the just for the unjust, taking the place of the unjust.

[21 : 35] That's you and I, the unjust, the sinner. And here's the just one, the sinless one, taking our place.

Nothing should be more amazing to you or to me tonight than that this Son of God took our place on that middle cross.

That he died the death we deserve to die. That he bore the penalty of our sin. That he endured the pains of hell so that we would not have to.

Amen. And that's mediation. Along with the substitution, what he's doing is mediating between his people and God and God and his people.

And the mediator has to represent both sides consistently and equally. Here is Jesus, the Son of God, coming to represent us to God and he has to represent our particular case accurately, perfectly, wholly, completely.

[22 : 49] He can leave nothing out of our need, nothing out of what we deserve to take to himself. He has to do it completely. And on the other side, he has to represent God completely toward us.

He has to represent every facet of God's relationship with lost sinners. He has to represent God in bearing his wrath, in revealing his love, in coming to quieten his wrath and in coming to satisfy his

justice.

And that's what he has done. And that's where you find it's so important that the cross is the middle one, the cross of Jesus.

It's significant truly that each of the Gospels actually makes specific reference to the criminals being crucified on each side of him. In other words, the Gospels are really projecting at us this really seriously important point that as humanity is divided into lost and saved, it is the cross of Christ that stands between.

It's the cross of Christ and our relationship to him that makes all the difference as to whether we're on the lost side or on the saved side. You can't take the cross out of the middle of the three.

[24 : 14] It stands forevermore between a lost humanity and a saved people. And the really big question tonight for me and for you is which side of that middle cross are we on?

Are we represented by the thief, the criminal who went on railing against Christ? And even if we're not railing against Christ and even if we're not openly against Christ, are we still lost?

Are we still represented by that cross on one side with the lost criminal? Or are you amongst the other, are you one of those represented by the other one?

Who has come to know yourself as a needy lost sinner, who has come to know Jesus as the savior of such sinners as we are, who died the death of the middle cross so that we would not be on the other side?

Where are you tonight? Where am I in relation to this Christ? And not only did he know himself and know Christ, thirdly, he knew what to do.

[25 : 34] And here's the next part of the passage and it's a wonderful part of it as well. He began in a lost state and as he went into this saved state as he's brought to know himself and to know Christ, he also knew what to do.

And what he did was call out to the Lord. Jesus, or in some translations, Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. He believed that Christ had a kingdom. He believed that Christ was coming into his kingdom.

He believed that Christ was a king. He believed that Christ as the king of this kingdom had the authority and the power to bring him with him into this kingdom.

Lord, remember me when you come into this kingdom. Two words or three words, Lord, remember me.

That's all you need. To know yourself, to know Jesus and who he is and what he came to do and what he's done.

[26 : 37] And then on the basis of knowing yourself and knowing Jesus, coming and knowing what to do to say, Lord, remember me. Because if Jesus remembers you, it doesn't matter who forgets you.

If Jesus is remembering you, you're safe within that remembering. That's why you find us, we'll see in a minute in closing, why Jesus said to this man, truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.

You have asked me to remember you, remember you, I'm never going to forget you. I'm going to take you with me today to that garden above where God is.

And all the way through the Bible you'll find such an important emphasis on God remembering his people. Of course, there's a sense in which God never forgets anything. But when the Bible says God remembers his people, that means he has a specific regard for them.

It's not just that they never pass out of his mind, but that he is always intent on doing the best for them, the best that he can possibly do. That's what God is committed to.

[27 : 46] That's what you're praying for. When you ask Jesus, Lord, remember me, remember me, you're asking Jesus to take you into his safekeeping for time and eternity.

You and I need someone to remember us throughout all the changes of life. Someone to remember us when we have trauma in our lives.

Someone to remember us when we miss loved ones. Someone to remember us when life's difficulties unexpectedly come our way.

Someone to remember us when it seems nobody else is able to help us. When it seems nobody else understands what we're going through mentally or physically, spiritually.

We need someone to remember us when we come to die. Because however good people can be to us and for us as companions and friends and relatives and however much we will be looked after in

terms of final arrangements and even the disposal of our body to be laid into the ground, however much we need that sort of remembering and we're thankful for it.

[29 : 03] We need a greater remembering. We need a remembering that will take us safely through death and that will deposit us on the other side in glory. We need a remembering of us when our body is lying and returning to the dust.

Someone who remembers that body and whose it is and will bring it back again to life in resurrection life. We need someone to remember us throughout the ages of eternity who will continue to provide for us worlds without end.

Who's going to do it? He is. And only he can. Lord, remember me.

What a great prayer to a great Savior. Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

And that's where you find so many aspects of the book of Psalms especially, so precious. You find the psalmist in Psalm 139, for example, saying, How precious, Lord, are your thoughts to me.

[30 : 28] God's thoughts of him, God's remembrance of him, where he knows that he's safe within the custody and the care of God. Remember the context of Psalm 139, where David begins by thinking of God's perfect knowledge of him piercing into his mind, into his soul.

You know the very words I'm going to speak before I speak them. You knew me before I existed. You knew me when I was formed in the womb. You took account there of my form.

And it's after all of that that he comes to this wonderful statement, How precious are your thoughts to me, O God. within the womb, out with the womb, in the grave, in eternity.

God's thoughts of his people. That's where our security is. That's where our comfort is. That's where our hope is based. And in Psalm 56, another Psalm where David is hounded by the Philistines who are after him and pursuing him doggedly and arrogantly and coming to attack him. He pleads with the Lord. He prays to the Lord. And one of the things he says there in that Psalm in verse 8 is, Will you not or have you not put all my tears into your bottle?

[31 : 52] Are they not written in your book? That's one of the most wonderful statements of faith in the Bible where David is actually saying, I know that I'm in trouble.

I know the Philistines are harassing me. I know my life is really from pillar to post and I don't know what tomorrow is going to bring. And I'm anxious and I'm afraid. And Lord, when I'm afraid, as he says in that Psalm, I will trust in you.

You know, tonight God has, of course this is a picture for us, not physically it's a picture, but it's a really precious one. God has his vial, his little flask for each and every one of his own.

And every tear that they shed, he puts it into that flask. He remembers it. He records it. It's precious to him.

Are they not, he says, in your book? What could be more precious to us tonight? than that Jesus remembers us in every circumstance. That even the very tears that fall from our eyes, he puts them into his bottle, he keeps them, he treasures them.

[33 : 09] He regards them as his own. He sees them as meaningful in his life as in yours. And so you leave him in a heavenly state.

We need to rush through this, but where he said, Jesus said to him, truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise. What a day this was for this man.

Look at how it began. Here we find him in a lost state. Then he comes to be found in a saved state. Now he's being brought into a heavenly state. Truly I say to you, today you'll be with me in paradise. It shows us just how quickly and how easily this day in time flows into eternity. That's how it is.

There is no gap between our leaving this world and entering eternity, whether it's a lost eternity or a saved eternity, but eternity begins immediately that we leave this world.

Time flows into eternity in an unbroken flow. There is no in between. There's no purgatory. There's no place where you have to do some more preparation or where something else happens before you can enter eternity fully.

[34 : 24] Today you will be with me in paradise. What does he mean with me? Well, he asks the Lord to remember him.

And this is the Lord's answer to his prayer. You will be with me. You will be where I am. You will be where I am going.

We're going to the same place. What a consolation for this man and his suffering. And for some Christians, life in this world is a long struggle.

It seems at times that it may never be anything other than a struggle. for the Lord says, truly I say to you, you will be with me in paradise.

And the companionship of Christ will far more than compensate for a world of pain. Because what God is saying in the book of Revelation and elsewhere is when we come to that final state and when we enter into a saved eternity in Christ, God himself shall wipe away every tear from their eyes.

[35 : 53] This man was really hurting. Just imagine the pain of his crucifixion alongside of Jesus. And yet here is how Jesus answered his question, remember me.

Remember you truly, I say. Of course I'll remember you. And I'll remember you in no lesser way than this. today you will be with me. Where there are no tears.

Where there is no darkness. Where there is no pain. Where death does not enter. Where there is bliss as we sang at the right hand of God.

And it's paradise. It's a word that comes from the Persians who invented this word for the gardens. Their kings used to enjoy a secluded garden that nobody could actually get into and they could share that in privacy with their friends.

And this paradise is the paradise that God has for his people. Paradise in heaven. A paradise that Christ has purchased.

[37 : 02] The cross in the middle has secured the paradise that he speaks of. You will be with me in paradise.

The Bible begins with a garden. It was man created by God and placed in that garden. That perfect environment. And man was thrown out of it justly by God because he spoiled God's creation by his sin.

And the Bible ends with another garden. A garden city where in Revelation 22 you find it described the river that flows from the throne of God.

And on each side of the river there's three bearing twelve manner of fruits. Bearing its fruit constantly. And God and the Lamb with his people together in that paradise.

How do you get from the garden out of which man was cast to the garden of heaven where God's redeemed will live forever?

[38 : 20] Well you have to come through another garden. you have to come through Gethsemane and through the cross of Christ. And you read in John that in that place he was crucified there was a garden.

And in a garden that tomb in which no one had ever been buried that's where they laid Jesus. And through that death and resurrection in that garden sinners come to be saved and delivered from the death that we brought on ourselves into the life that Jesus brings.

Let's pray. Lord our God we thank you that we have life in abundance in Jesus Christ your Son. We bless you tonight for the way in which he is presented in the gospel to us. It is your gospel it is your plan. You have indeed come to specify the very terms of it.

You have set it before us in such a way that you clearly reveal yourself in it. We pray for grace oh Lord this evening to follow these words of the criminal Lord remember me.

[39 : 43] Help us to put ourselves Lord into that position and by your grace enable us we pray to be confident and secure in you and to realize the truth of your promise to your people that they indeed will come to be with you in paradise and all for Jesus sake.

Amen. Let's conclude now our service singing this time in Psalm 73 Psalm number 73 and singing from the Scottish Psalter page 316.

We'll sing verses 23 to 26. Nevertheless continually O Lord I am with thee thou dost me hold by my right hand and still upholdest me.

To verse 26 my flesh and heart doth faint and fail but God doth fail me never for of my heart God is the strength and portion forever. Let's sing these verses now in conclusion.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[41 : 01] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

[43 : 23] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. forever. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and evermore.
Amen.