

The Thief on the Cross

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[0 : 00] a big part of that, so I thank you for that. We're going to be looking at Luke chapter 23, a story of the two criminals that were on either side of our Lord Jesus Christ at his crucifixion, a story obviously well known, but perhaps not well appreciated in all of its details.

So Luke chapter 23, we'll begin reading at verse 39 through to verse 43. 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 two criminals on either side of our Lord Jesus Christ were kids at some point in their life. They were running the streets of Jerusalem, perhaps playing games, that youthful vigor, that youthful laughter, that youthful innocence that we speak of.

They had parents who perhaps were proud of them. They maybe were in the synagogue being taught on the Sabbath days.

[2 : 03] And there may be a whole host of other facts in their lives that would be most interesting for us if we knew them. At some point in their life, they started to take a turn.

We don't know if it was a gradual or sudden, but at some point in their life, they ended up in a so-called jail, waiting to be crucified.

And it is quite remarkable how our lives can change in the moment of hours or just a day.

Small boys running around, playing, and at some point they're waiting to be crucified. Amidst the thousands upon thousands of crucifixions that would take place by the Romans, here there are three.

And here there are two on either side of the eternal Son of God. Now, we need to understand the context a little bit.

[3 : 17] The criminals here, one of them who was hanged, railed at him, that is Jesus. If you read Matthew's Gospel, what you find is that actually both of them at one point were mocking and scorning and ridiculing him along with those who were not being crucified.

So at some points, this one criminal seems to have shifted. We don't know precisely why, but I suspect it may have something to do with the power of Christ, the power of the Gospel, the grace of God.

But both of them at one point were railing at Christ. Here we read, one of the criminals who hanged, railed at him. Now remember the context.

Christ is not performing miracles. Christ is not at Cana. He's not turning water into wine or water into wine. He is not walking on the water.

He's not feeding the 5,000. He's not raising Lazarus from the dead. He's not performing miracles in towns and villages.

[4 : 35] He's not at the mere word saying, Your son shall live and he lives. The context is not Christ in his obvious, regal, kingly glory performing miracles.

The context is Christ crucified on a cross. A criminal of criminals. And so the criminal who is hanged, nailed at Christ.

Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us. You see, this criminal actually represents how many people in the world who believe in God to some extent treat God.

And how is that? Well, you see, it's really quite simple. Many people use God as they need God. They use God in the sense that when they are in trouble, they expect God to bail them out.

They may be unhealthy and sick. Lord, if you just heal me and make me feel better, I will believe in you. I will serve you. Lord, if you just take care of my financial problem that I have now, my business or whatever it may be, I will believe in you.

[5 : 54] Lord, if you deal with my child or my spouse or whatever else it may be, you have a problem and you want God to get you out of that problem, even though you have disregarded him, ignored him, slighted him for many years.

But then something happens and you say, well, God, if you exist, and I believe you do, get me out of this predicament.

And he's obviously a very reasonable man, isn't he? Because he says to the Lord, save yourself and us. It's not like he says, save us, get us out of this predicament.

He's reasonable. He says, hey, you can come down too. Remember the people were saying, if you are the Christ, if you are the Son of God, come down and we will believe you.

And they weren't being crucified. Here this man is saying, come down and please bring us with you. He is treating God as so many treat God.

[6 : 59] They use him. And we have to be very careful that we do not treat God in this way, that we use him only when we are suffering, only when we have a need, only when we are in trouble.

Should you call out to the Lord in a time of need and trouble? Absolutely. We'd lose about 149 Psalms if that were not the case. But we don't use God.

We worship God. And this individual appears to be using God. Now, as the text continues, and I just want to say before we get into this other criminal, that I think his theology has been underappreciated on a significant level.

The reason I say that is because usually this criminal becomes the type of person where we discuss, well, if you just believe before you die and you go to a hospital and someone says, I believe in Jesus, they're going to heaven.

And this is the evidence for it. Or you don't need to do any good works because obviously the criminal didn't do any good works. And he was saved.

[8 : 11] Or you don't need to be baptized to be saved because look at this criminal. Now, clearly I'm not going to get into any of those issues. They explain themselves away fairly easily.

My point is simply this. I think in using this criminal to sometimes make a point, we miss the beauty of his theology here.

Now, here he is in verse 40. But the other rebuked him, saying, Do you not fear God since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?

You see, he fears God. Do you not fear God? I have no doubt he was raised with some knowledge of the scriptures.

The fear of God is actually the beginning of wisdom. And we see the beginning of wisdom right before our eyes here. Do you not fear God? For this man will become wise.

[9 : 16] And the lack of the fear of God is the beginning of foolishness. I think it was Jerry Bridges who once said, The church could use a lot more of the fear of God preached from its pulpits.

Not a type of dread and terror where you're scared to ever enter his presence, and you want nothing to do with him. The type of fear, the awesomeness, the reverence, the way in which his attributes shine so powerfully forth in how you conceive of him, that you can't help but fear him.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, we're told in Hebrews, that when he offered up his prayers with loud cries and tears, he was heard because of his reverence, his fear of God.

Do you not fear God? Since you are under the same sentence of condemnation. You should fear God for what he can do.

And so this criminal clearly has the fear of God. He is already perhaps a better theologian than many in the church who have completely disregarded the fear of God.

[10 : 32] But his theology gets better. Because in verse 41 he says, And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds.

One thing preachers should never do is mention movies from pulpits, because if you haven't watched it recently, and people go back and watch it, they say, Do you know that scene that you, are you approving of that scene?

And there's, you know, something happened, and you're in big trouble, because there's a scene that was not appropriate. The kids were there, and Pastor Stephen had recommended this movie, and he's fired.

And so you should never recommend a movie from the pulpit. But there's this great film, Shawshank Redemption.

And in the Shawshank Redemption, there's this point where you have, obviously, Morgan Freeman, and the quote goes something like this, Don't you know that everybody in here is innocent?

[11 : 44] You see, in jail, everybody's innocent. But in church, everybody's guilty. And here, you have great theology, because he is being crucified on a cross.

He's been nailed to a cross, hanging in naked shame, one of the most gruesome tortures imaginable. And he is saying that we deserve to be here.

That we indeed justly, that we are receiving the due reward of our deeds. Here's a man who is on death row, and he says, I deserve to be here for what I've done.

That's a mark of grace. To say that you are guilty is one thing. To believe you are guilty in this moment is quite another.

And you see, his theology continues to impress, because not only does he have the fear of God, not only does he recognize himself to be a sinner, but then he says, this man, speaking of Christ, has done nothing wrong.

[13 : 05] This man has done nothing wrong. I don't know how much he understood of what he was saying at that point. Clearly enough to know that Jesus is innocent, but it is almost a little bit of an understatement if you think about it.

This man has done nothing wrong. We could also say, this man has done everything right. It's one thing to abstain from sin.

It's another thing to be perfectly righteous. And the man there before his very eyes, the Lord Jesus Christ, is not simply the sinless Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

He is the righteous Son of God who said, it is my meat and drink to do the will of my Father. I have come down from heaven not to do my will, but the will of Him who sent me.

He is the one whose every word, whose every thought, whose every deed, whose every action, whose every non-action, pleased God. I always do the things that please the Father.

[14 : 12] We are receiving the due reward for our deeds. This man has done everything right. He has done nothing wrong.

And this would be a nice story, but perhaps tragic if we were to end it at verse 41.

Because what good does it do in a certain sense to say, I'm guilty, I've sinned, and this person has done nothing wrong? It actually is just a very sad story.

Because you have people being killed, and you have an innocent person being killed, and ultimately they're killed, and that's it. And we move on with life, and we go on. It's an absolute tragedy if verse 42 is not there.

Because he has boldness, and faith. Faith, perhaps, unlike anywhere else in all of the New Testament.

[15 : 22] Why do I say that? Because while everybody else in the world is mocking, is ridiculing, is pulling the beard, while his disciples have fled, who spent years with our Lord.

This man says, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. He, unlike everyone else, believed that this crucified individual beside him had a kingdom.

Not Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom at Cana. Not when he fed the 5,000, and they all said, let us make him our king. No.

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. When Jesus is at his worst, so to speak. This criminal is at his best.

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And, I don't mean to make this sound trite, but, there's a sort of sense, if we were texting, you know how we put LOL at the end, when we kind of want to make it a light-hearted statement.

[16 : 39] You know, you, hey, you know, you got an extra box ticket, for the game for me, LOL, kind of just so it's not like you're really asking, but you're kind of asking.

Honey, hope dinner tastes great tonight. I'm home soon, LOL. You know, just, you use LOL for everything, to just take the edge off. And, you can sort of imagine that this guy, hey, remember me when you come into your kingdom, LOL.

You know, yeah, like, think about this. Our Lord Jesus Christ, is crucified. This man thinks he has a kingdom. Now, if that is true, and it is true, our Lord is going into a kingdom, where there are multitudes, upon multitudes of angels, worshiping him in festive assembly.

The Father, has seated him in glory. There are all of the saints of God, who have gone to be with him, who will be around the throne, with the elders, worshiping. And, do you think Jesus is going to remember this person?

Why would he remember him? Surely, he's got much more important matters to attend to, much more important things to look upon, much more important worship to receive. And, this person has the effrontery to say to the Lord Jesus Christ, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.

[18 : 11] And, how does our Lord respond? Well, he said to him, truly, I say to you, today, you will be with me, in paradise.

I haven't, really, done a thorough check, but I would be surprised, if anyone, in the history, of God's recorded dealings, with people, have ever had such, an assurance, of their eternal destiny, as this man, who woke up one morning, about to be crucified, and, hours later, finds himself being told, by the Son of God, he will be, today, in paradise.

But, you see, the glory of the gospel, actually, is that, those words, you will be with me, in paradise, are not merely reserved, for this man. In fact, the glory of the gospel, the glory of the fact, that we have been justified, freely, by his grace, and there is therefore, now, no condemnation, for those who are, in Christ Jesus, the glory of the gospel, is those words, that God spoke, to his son, you are my son, whom I love, with you, I am well pleased, are words, that he speaks, to us each day, and they are words, whereby, we can read this text, you will be with me, in paradise, and receive, no less assurance, than that man did, on the cross, that ill-fated day.

You see, this is how, God, works, a man wakes up, to be, murdered, crucified, and by all public accounts, sent to a very dark place, but in comes, the Lord Jesus Christ, crucified, beside him, who takes him, far away, from darkness, into the marvelous light, of his kingdom, and assures him, today, you will be with me, in paradise, and what is it, that makes the difference, it's believing, in Jesus Christ, the son of God, there are two things, that Christ, that Christ marvels at, in the New Testament, two things, where we read, of him marveling, the faith, of the Roman centurion, and he marvels, at the unbelief, of his people, in Nazareth,

Christ marvels, imagine that, Christ marvels, and I marvel, when I see, the free grace, of our savior, towards an ill deserving sinner, and I marvel, that what this man, received from Christ, is nothing better, but nothing worse, than what I have received, and what you can receive, if you believe, in Jesus Christ, Christ, let us pray, our father in heaven, we thank you, for your word, what a glorious word, it is, what a glorious account, of a real sinner, not a pretend sinner, but a real sinner, saved by, a real savior, the only savior, the savior, who is now, seated in glory, and is waiting, for us, to be with him, in paradise, bless us, so that we may, achieve that end, by his grace, and his mercy, amen, helping, the Taking christ Christian, name, and■■■ his mercy,

[22 : 15] Emily, and did not his mercy keep him, amely ahead, but a■■, the Ken, oh, after the■■■, he, let us wait, there too, let us experience,