3-1-20

Luke 23:39-43

We began our study last week of the seven last sayings of Jesus while He was on the cross. The first thing He said was “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” The whole reason for Jesus going through what He did was to bring salvation to mankind. Here, He prays for God to bring success to His sacrifice.

Jesus then had a brief but important interaction with one of the thieves who had been crucified with Him. The interaction with the thief demonstrates for us the saving power of God and that no one is beyond His reach.

The first thing to keep in mind is that there are no accidents where God is concerned. Seven hundred years earlier in Isaiah 53:12, God had said that His Son would be “numbered with the transgressors”. Now, in His crucifixion, we see Jesus between two thieves, all three sentenced to death. This was part of the shame that Jesus had to bear; that although He was the Son of God, He was considered no better than a common thief.

With Jesus in between them, both thieves were the same distance from Him; one did not have an advantage over the other. Both had carried their cross along with Jesus, both heard what the religious leaders and the crowds said about Him, both saw the sign that was hung above His head, both heard His prayer for forgiveness. But one was destined for paradise, the other for hell.

It is natural for us to try to come up with a reason that this particular thief cried out to Jesus for mercy. Perhaps he was actually a more noble man; perhaps, deep inside, he had a better heart. But these ideas are false and take away from the glory of God. Both men were equally depraved. In Matthew 27, we read how the chief priests, scribes, elders, and the crowds were mocking Jesus; challenging Him to prove He was the Christ and King by coming down off the cross. In verse 44 it says, “The robbers who had been crucified with Him were also insulting Him with the same words.” We must understand that it was strictly by the power of God that this man was saved.

It is the same for each of us. Without Christ, each of us is ultimately capable of the worse possible thing you have ever heard of someone doing. Jeremiah 17:9 tells us, “The heart is more deceitful that all else and is desperately sick.” This statement applies to all mankind. Furthermore, we can’t change on our own. Paul tells us in Romans 8:7, “[T]he mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so.” Our carnal minds cannot follow the law of God; our carnal minds want nothing to do with Him.

In all this is demonstrated the power and the work of the Holy Spirit. It is He who draws us to Christ and it is He who gives us the faith necessary to believe on Jesus for salvation. It is completely by grace that we receive this gift of salvation because we don’t deserve it and we try to cling to our sin. We have no room or reason to boast in our salvation because we had nothing to do with it; and such is the case with the thief.

Also, consider what the thief saw; there was nothing to draw him to Jesus. Jesus had been scourged mercilessly; any skin He had left was in shreds. His face was bloated from the beatings. He wore a ridiculous crown of thorns. All the religious leaders mocked Him. And here He was, nailed to a cross just like the thieves were. There was nothing in what the thief saw to draw him to Christ.

Consider, too, that satan was there in great power. Jesus had done nothing but good to the people, yet they were vicious beyond any reason. Satan had the jeering people challenging Him with, “If You are the Son of God…” Think back to the three temptations that Jesus endured in the wilderness with satan. Two of them began with, “If You are the Son of God…” Satan was driving the two robbers. They were in torment; they had been nailed to a cross and were hanging from it. They were slowly suffocating to death. Yet they both used precious breath to hurl insults at Jesus. Both were under the power of satan.

All this shows that this thief’s conversion was supernatural; it was the work of the Holy Spirit. There is no other explanation. It was a miracle and to the glory of God. And it is the same for each of us who have accepted Jesus as Saviour.

Another thing we learn about here is the necessity of our own works for salvation: there is none. The thief was nailed to the cross by his feet and hands. He couldn’t go anywhere to do good; his hands were not free to perform any works. He was dying; there was no time for him to start his life over and live better.

Paul tells us in Romans 6:6 that our old self was crucified with Christ. We can think of ourselves also as being nailed to the cross, unable to do any good works, and being entirely dependent on Jesus for salvation. Now, we are certainly called to do good works. But we do them to be pleasing to God and Jesus; out of love for them. Good works become evidence of our salvation; but good works never save us.

We have here two men on crosses, one on either side of Jesus. Both are in the presence of God; both have the Holy Spirit nearby; and we know that God does not desire the death of the wicked. But during the time they had to think, one man clung to his sin and refused to acknowledge the One who could save him. The other responded to the Holy Spirit working in his heart. He had come to the cross, desperately wicked; he had joined the crowds in reviling the Son of God. But now, he began the process of sanctification.

He began by publicly rebuking the other thief. He broke away from the grip of satan and spoke up for the Saviour. He proclaimed Jesus’ innocence. Think about what he did; he proclaimed Christ in the midst of all the crowd that was subjecting Him to scorn. In aligning himself with Jesus, he was opening himself up to the crowd’s ridicule. Pray that each of us would have the same courage.

Salvation comes with realizing our sinfulness and this brings about repentance. The thief demonstrates this when he confesses his own guilt and the appropriateness of his punishment. He expresses his belief in Jesus as King when he references Christ coming into His Kingdom. He throws himself entirely on Jesus’ mercy when he asks “remember me”. In those simple words, he asks for mercy; he asks for salvation; he pleads for forgiveness.

It is the same for us. We must ask for salvation only on the basis of God’s grace and mercy. We cannot add to the request any merit on our own part. If we do, then we have missed the whole point. We have no merit for our own salvation. Our eternal life comes strictly from the work of Christ on the cross; it is all from God. We must humbly submit ourselves, as sinners, to the mercy of God through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The response that came from Jesus would have been the best words the thief had ever heard in his life: “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.”

Our Saviour Jesus is truly wonderous and truly glorious. In the scourging and crucifixion, He endured tremendous physical pain. His heart was broken because the ones doing this to Him were ones He deeply loved. Most difficult and painful of all, He was experiencing God’s wrath. He was in the process of bearing the consequences of all those sins He didn’t commit in our place. In the midst of all this, He heard the voice of one wretched man beside Him; and granted him salvation.

The words “Truly I say to you” are emphatic. Jesus has reassured the thief that the statement is entirely true; that no part of it will be delayed; that no part of it is metaphor. The thief could count on being with Jesus in a place of bliss and peace that very day. His physical suffering would continue for a time; his torment would increase rather than decrease; but when it was over, it would be over forever. He no longer needed to fear the judgement of God.

It is interesting that when Jesus said “today”, that He issued a prophecy. In addition to being an agonizing death, crucifixion was a notoriously slow death. Usually a person would hang on the cross for two or three days, fighting for air, before finally dying. The thieves would have had no reason to expect anything different. But we learn in John 19:31-33, that the religious leaders didn’t want the bodies hanging there during the Passover celebration. They went to Pilot and asked that the legs of the crucified men be broken. This would cause them to die within a few hours rather than days. So the thief did die that day, today, and was with Jesus.

In John’s account, we also see that Jesus had already died by the time the Roman soldiers got there to break the legs, so Jesus’ were not broken. This was important to fulfill the prophecy of Psalm 34:20, “He keeps all his bones, not one of them is broken”. It also demonstrates that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Passover because none of the Passover’s sacrificial lamb’s bones were to be broken.

We learn here of the destination of a man’s spirit upon physical death. Certainly, the body remains here on earth and turns back to dust, until the final resurrection of the dead. But a person’s spirit doesn’t experience the same fate; there is no “soul sleep”. Jesus told the thief that that very day, they would be together in Paradise. He would be fully aware and truly experience what the afterlife held for him. Other passages of the Bible show this also.

In Acts 7:59, while Stephen is being stoned, he cries out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” In Philippians 1, Paul considers the possibilities of continuing or being put to death and he says “But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ for that is very much better.” Paul knows that the moment he dies, he will be with Christ in spirit. Paul also says in 2 Corinthians 5:8, “to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord”. It is reassuring for us to know that we who are Christians will be immediately in the presence of Jesus when we pass on from this life. Our glorified bodies will follow at the time of the resurrection.

Another thing we learn here is that Jesus did not spend time in hell after His death. This is a common teaching that He spent the three days of His physical death in hell, suffering God’s wrath there. He tells the thief that “today”, you will be “with Me” in Paradise. Jesus will also be in Paradise. Jesus suffered all of God’s wrath while on the cross; He made complete atonement for all who would follow Him during the crucifixion. That is why He was able to say later “It is finished”.

One final thing to notice is that Jesus says “with Me”. The thief will not simply be in Paradise; he will be there with Jesus. Jesus desires the fellowship of His people. He wants to be around us. Going back to the Garden of Eden, God created people to have fellowship with; to hang around with. Of course, mankind messed this up; but in His great love and mercy, God made a way to have fellowship again.

This whole idea is even more amazing when we think that God was perfectly content when the only existence was the Trinity. They lived together in perfect love and fellowship with each other in perfect oneness. God did not need us. Yet God chose to create. And He chose to love us beyond what we can imagine.

This is a great comfort and reassurance for us: God wants to have us come to Him and be with Him forever. He will call to us and He will never turn away anyone who comes to Him through Jesus Christ.

In the account of the two thieves, we see a representation of humanity. All of us are wicked, guilty, and deserve punishment. But Jesus performed His work that we may have His righteousness given to us. Much of humanity will be like the unrepentant thief. They will reject the loving gracious offer of salvation and they will die in their sins; these will suffer an eternity of wrath. However, some of humanity will be like the repentant thief, and will accept the offer of salvation. They will submit to Christ on the basis of His mercy alone and receive eternal life.

How glorious is our God, who was willing to go through all these things, that we might get to be with Him forever. Let us gratefully accept this wonderful gift, so that we may enjoy God in eternity.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, how comforting it is to know, that there is no time that is inappropriate for us to turn to You. Even while bearing the weight of sin and wrath, You here the plea of a single sinner and are pleased to care for him. Thank You for caring for each of us who have come to You for salvation; we are assured that You will turn none of us away.

We know, Lord, that in the day we leave this life, that we shall be immediately with You in bliss. But we also know that You have work for us to do while we are hear on this earth. Strengthen us to do this work; may Your Holy Spirit ever open our eyes to what You would have us do. By His power, we will do Your will in the joyful knowledge that we can be of service to You.

Now we worship You Jesus. You are our Saviour and King; You are God the Son. Thank You for making us citizens of Your Kingdom. We look forward to the day when Your Kingdom is established here on earth and that You will rule here; completely sovereign.

Lord Jesus, it is in Your most holy name we pray

Amen